THE GREAT OUTDOORS! 12 EXHILARATING GETAWAYS JUST A DRIVE AWAY

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MAY 2025

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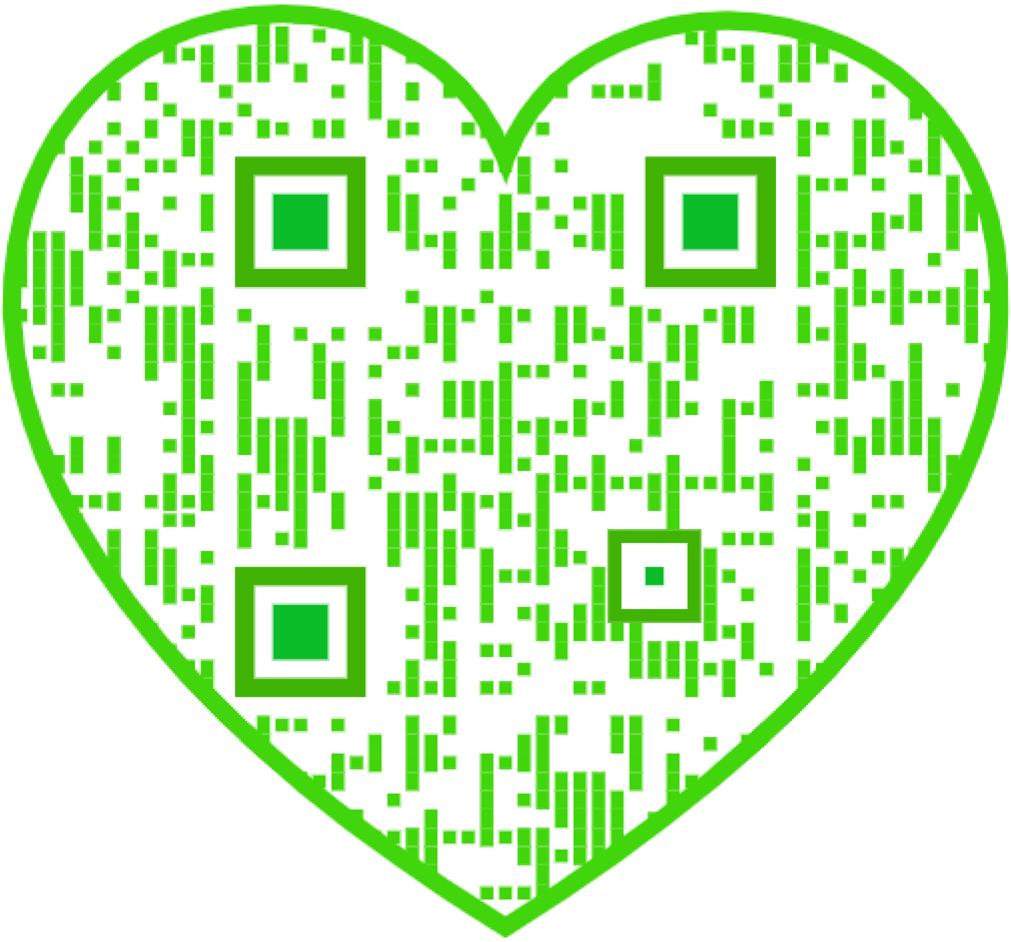

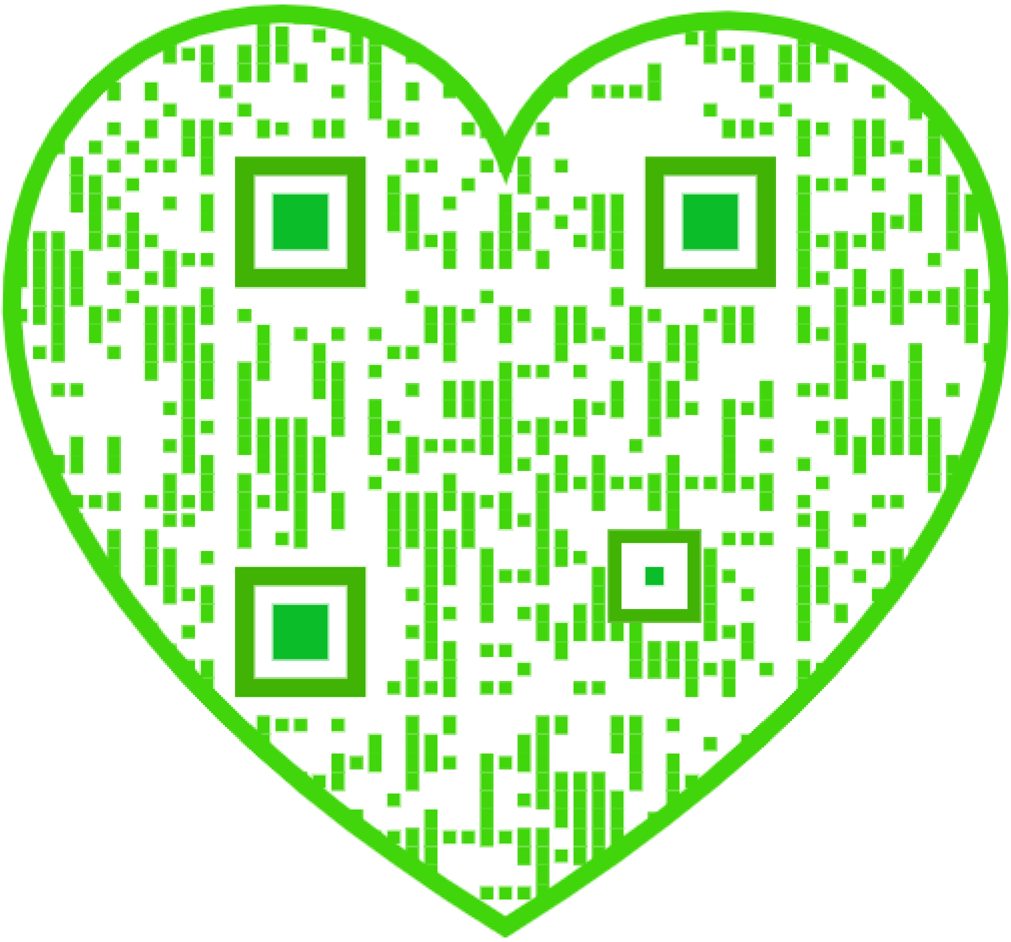

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GULF TO BAY & MORE

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America's Favorite Beaches meet some of America's finest things in St. Pete-Clearwater. The community is filled with art, culture and charming accommodations. One standout that showcases all three is The Vinoy Resort and Golf Club, Autograph Collection, a pillar of luxury in the area for a century. This historic hotel offers an exclusive experience in the heart of downtown St. Pete. Close to the iconic pink building, visitors will find beautiful beaches, renowned art museums, and fine dining.

Vanessa Williams, the property's General Manager, has more than thirty years of experience in luxury hotels. She considers it an honor to be a custodian of the St. Pete landmark and takes great pride in its storied history and modern evolution. The backdrop of sugar-white sand

“ST. PETE BEACH TO ME IS QUINTESSENTIAL—IT SPEAKS TO OUR CITY.”

VANESSA WILLIAMS

General Manager of The Vinoy Resort and Golf Club

beaches is a particular draw. “If the beach is what you want, the beach is right there,” Williams says. “The accessibility of St. Pete-Clearwater is probably the highlight of the destination and what The Vinoy brings to downtown.” Williams has traveled and lived all over the world and confidently proclaims her favorite beach is found locally: “St. Pete Beach to me is quintessential—It speaks to our city and the sand is the prettiest stretch of beach I’ve seen.”

Luxury travelers will find a bevy of exceptional cultural experiences, upscale restaurants and local shops with hand-crafted clothing, art and creations. Williams loves that The Vinoy is in the heart of it all. “What cannot be overlooked is the incredible art and culture we have within walking distance of the resort,” she says. “We have enough museums that you can lean into whatever strikes your fancy.” The culinary scene is just as robust: “The most amazing part of downtown St. Pete is being able to cross the street and have some of the finest dining venues that the city has to offer.”

Describing her perfect day in St. Pete, Williams says that she would “grab a coffee at Lottie in the Vinoy lobby and take a walk along the bay. The likelihood of seeing a dolphin or two is pretty high, and I think that’s a special way to start the day. Then, I’d spend the rest of the morning at the pool and have a lovely lunch at Juno & The Peacock, followed by an afternoon at the spa. To finish, I’d head to The Veranda for a martini and have dinner at Elliott Aster.”

Discover more in St. Pete-Clearwater with the Gulf to Bay magazine. Scan the code to read or order a copy.

LOCAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Vanessa Williams’ three must-do experiences for guests

*“I’m especially proud of our **History Tour and High Tea at The Vinoy**. As someone of British descent, I think we hit the mark and stand up to some of the finest high teas around the world.”*

*“I highly recommend the tour and bourbon tasting at **Urban Stillhouse**. The second-floor bar features a vast collection of over 350 kinds of spirits.”*

*“An all-time favorite is a visit to the **Dalí Museum**. I don’t think you’re ever going to see a collection like that in one place.”*

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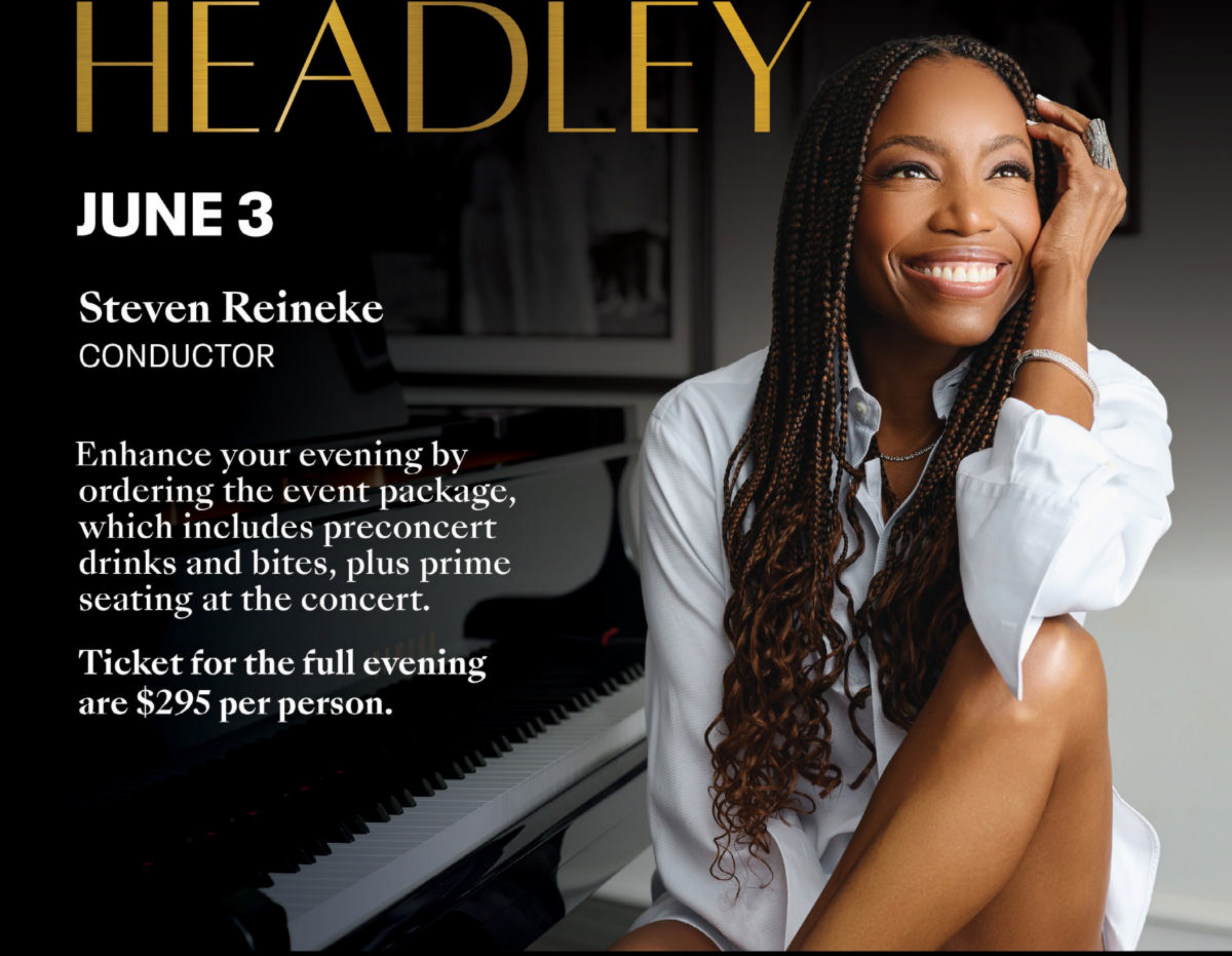

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Steven Reineke
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Artists, prices and programs subject to change.

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Volume 73 ■ Number 5

FEATURES

CHIMAY

Rock climbing in the Shawnee Hills of southern Illinois

68

The Wild, Wild Midwest

Whether you want to spend your vacation surfing, climbing, or biking, these are 12 epic getaways within a few hours' drive.

By Nina Kokotas Hahn

52

DOORS CLOSING

With ridership down and a fiscal reckoning looming, the L is in trouble. Here's why this civic treasure is worth saving.

By Tal Rosenberg

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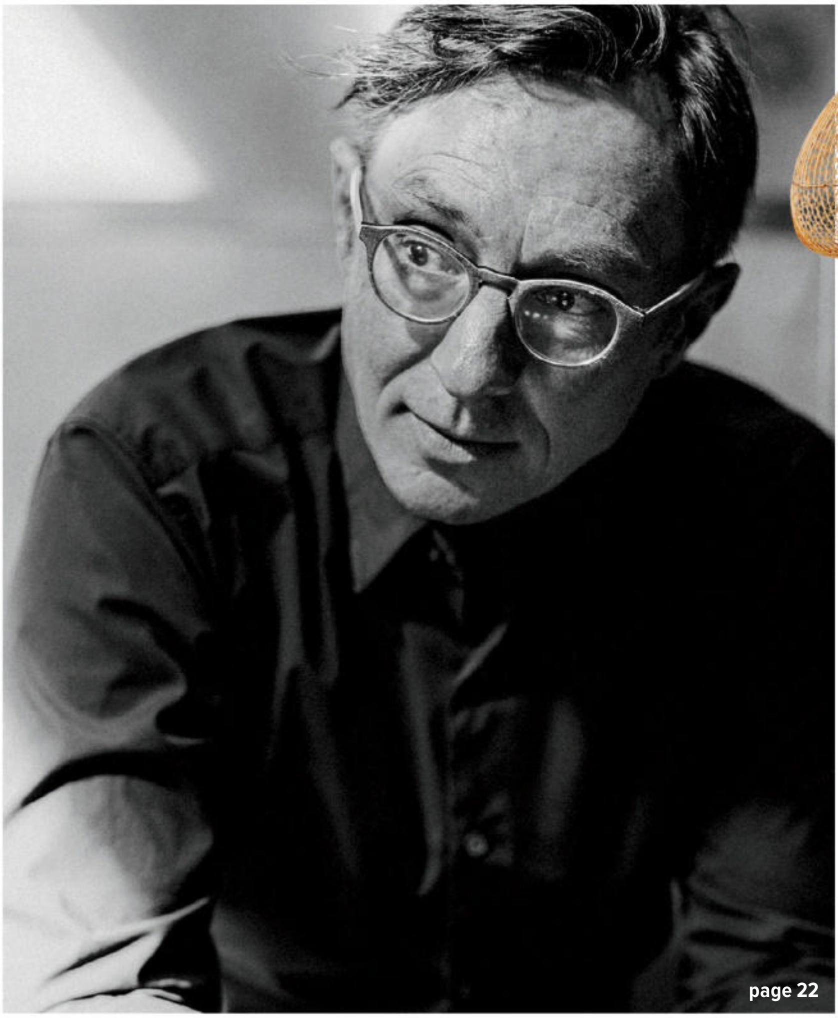
SHADES OF BOREDOM

Newly published images by photographer **Mark Steinmetz** highlight everyday life in a Chicago of 35 years ago.

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF SOUTHERNMOST ILLINOIS TOURISM BUREAU | ILLUSTRATION: RAMI NIEMI

DEPARTMENTS

CHIMAY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Indiana comes for Illinois … Origins of violence … A closer look at the Wrigley Building … An old condo that looks anything but … A dating guru dishes on Lincoln Park … An HGTV star’s wellness routine.

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By Rebecca Makkai

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Get some color for summer … A dance instructor shops her way along North Avenue … Two stores that mix retail with café culture.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: (PORTRAIT, DRINK) JEFF MARINI; (CHANDELIER) NIKOLA SCEPANOVIC; (CAVIAR DISH) COURTESY OF LILY JULIET; *ON THE COVER* FREDERIC PROCHASSON/GETTY IMAGES

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DINING EDITOR
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ART DIRECTOR
Elizabeth Carlisle
PHOTO DIRECTOR
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CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
Kelly Aiglon (Found)
Web Behrens (Go)
Edward McClelland (The 312)
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS
Mark Bazer, Ximena N. Beltran Quan Kiu, Lolly Bowean, Kim Brooks, Mark Caro, Thomas Connors, Kelley Engelbrecht, Nina Kokotas Hahn, Cate Huguelet, John Kessler (dining critic), **Rebecca Makkai, Jake Malooley, Heidi Mitchell, Grace Perry, Tal Rosenberg, Kathleen Rooney, Peter Sagal, Heidi Stevens, Judy Sutton Taylor, Mike Thomas**
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RESEARCH ASSISTANTS
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CONTRIBUTING ILLUSTRATORS
QuickHoney, John Kenzie
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Andrew Davis

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DIGITAL PRODUCERS
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PRODUCTION SPECIALIST
Alyssa Boyce

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SENIOR ACCOUNT MANAGERS
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REGIONAL SALES REPRESENTATIVES

Hawaii
Account Manager
DEBBIE ANDERSON
808-739-2200
debbieanderson@dmhawaii.com

Michigan
Regional Manager
JAN HESS-WAHL
248-505-0796
jhesswahl@comcast.net

Northeast U.S. and Mid-Atlantic
National Account Director
CYNTHIA DONAHER
917-679-5506
cynthia@donahermedia.com

Southeast U.S.
Account Director
WHITNEY FORD DICK
954-493-7311
whitney.ford@gmail.com

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SHANA WONG SOLARES
808-386-0872
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FROM THE EDITOR

To L and Back

FOR THIS MONTH'S COVER STORY (PAGE 52), WRITER TAL Rosenberg immersed himself in all things L. "I came into this as a novice, so I talked to *so* many people," he says. "I was reading about transit every day, refreshing blogs. I opted to take the L instead of drive whenever I could. I was living and breathing local transportation for the last five months." He did have to take a break, though, for emergency surgery following a gallstone attack a few days before his deadline – but was back to work a week later.

Rosenberg came away from his reporting feeling optimistic about the future of the city's train system, despite the serious troubles it's facing. "I was impressed by what advocacy groups have done in the last three or four years to bring attention to the issue, putting pressure on the CTA. And the legislators, the stakeholders, most of the other people I talked to have a real awareness of the intricacies of transit and of not repeating the mistakes of the past. Whatever solution they come up with, I think they're going to work really hard to get it right."

As for Rosenberg, he was inspired enough that he now wants to become an advocate for improving public transportation in Chicago. "I want to get more involved with transit after this."

Terrance Noland
Editor in Chief

INSIDE PEEK

Clarissa Bonet

An Elevated View

"I USED TO RIDE THE TRAIN AT NIGHT ALL the time. Now I don't as much," says photographer Clarissa Bonet, sounding like a lot of Chicagoans. She rides less often partly because she moved to Bridgeport but also because after COVID it was "so uncomfortable to be on the train," she says. "And I've experienced where you have to wait 15 minutes or more." But in photographing the L for this month's cover story (page 52), Bonet made up for lost time: She spent four days photographing its cars, stations, and riders. Despite some challenges, not the least of which were long wait times on weekends ("I would get like four shots an hour, the trains were coming so slow"), the assignment reminded her of what she'd been missing. "It made me realize how much I do still love the CTA," says Bonet. –KIM VAZQUEZ

ONE MAN'S TRASH

Alfonso "Piloto" Nieves Ruiz is known for making sculptures from, well, anything. Design director David Syrek got a firsthand look when *Chicago* prepared to photograph one of Nieves Ruiz's works (page 31). "He went into corners of his studio with a dustpan, got some dirt, and dumped it around the base," recalls Syrek. "Then he found a crushed soda pop can, a smashed coffee cup, and various pieces of debris and scattered them around." Your move, Michelangelo. –K.V.

PHOTOGRAPHY: (NOLAND) MICHAEL ZAJAKOWSKI; (BONET) CLARISSA BONET

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TALK TO US

I would be glad to see Kam Buckner run again. I would not vote for anyone else on this list.

@borrowNOTrent ***via X***

CHICAGO
THE NEXT BIG THING
THE 312
Talking Points
The Next Mayor

Who'll Succeed Brandon?

The city and voting population should take elections and the mayoral office seriously ["The Next Mayor," March]. This amazing city continues to fall well short of its unlimited potential. **@cmundychicago *via Instagram***

If Alexi Giannoulias or Susana Mendoza do this, I do wonder who fills their positions, neither of which are *that* desirable. **@nowalch *via X***

THEY'VE GOT NEXT
What a cool guy [Cale Darrell] selling even cooler clothes ["Next Big Things," March]. **@peruviansynchilla *via Instagram***

Saw Adisa Williams perform [the other] night. Highlight of the evening. She's hilarious. **@nathanmichael *via Instagram***

Badass photo of a badass pastry chef [Tatum Sinclair]. **@secret_donut_society *via Instagram***

PUSHBACK AGAINST THE MACHINES
Brilliant ["The Great AI Art Heist," March]. Finally a weapon against AI tech. **@CipherEtAlia *via X***

THE CASE FOR REPARATIONS
Chicago, as a municipality, has a responsibility and the ability to provide redress for its codification and participation of racism defined as redlining ["Overdue Bills," March]. **@WayTooChilly *via X***

A RESTAURANT REINVENTED
Always love Cellar Door Provisions ["Hitting Reset," March]. In a city that is increasingly seeing cookie-cutter hospitality group concepts expand, I am thankful to have them. **@mrsfoodlady *via Instagram***

MUSICAL RESPO
We should be seeing a flood of protest songs and instead we're putting on friendship bracelets and dancing to pop stars while the world burns ["Through the Flames," March]. **@notarealname247 *via Instagram***

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Q:

Has a Chicago mayor ever been assassinated?

CITY OF BIG QUESTIONS

ANSWERED BY EDWARD McCLELLAND

Yes. In fact, it's happened twice. The first murdered mayor was Carter Harrison. On October 28, 1893, two days before the closing of the World's Columbian Exposition, the 68-year-old former lawyer and real estate baron was relaxing in his mansion on South Ashland Avenue. Harrison, who was midway through his fifth term, always made himself available to the public, and that night, he was visited by Patrick Eugene Prendergast, an Irish immigrant who was angry with the mayor for not appointing him city attorney. Prendergast shot Harrison three times. Despite a defense by the great Clarence Darrow, the assassin was hanged.

The other victim was Anton Cermak, though he wasn't the intended target. On February 15, 1933, the first-term mayor, 59, was in Miami to meet with President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt. As Cermak was leaving FDR's car, an Italian immigrant named Giuseppe Zangara fired on the vehicle. A bystander supposedly hit Zangara with her purse, causing him to miss Roosevelt, but Cermak was hit in the chest. At first, his condition improved, but he developed colitis and died on March 6. The *Tribune* reported that Cermak told FDR, "I'm glad it was me, not you," but most scholars today believe he probably didn't say that – and in any case, surely wasn't glad at all.

Send your questions about the Chicago area to emcclelland@chicagomag.com.

PHOTOGRAPH: JACLYN RIVAS | ILLUSTRATION: GREG CLARKE

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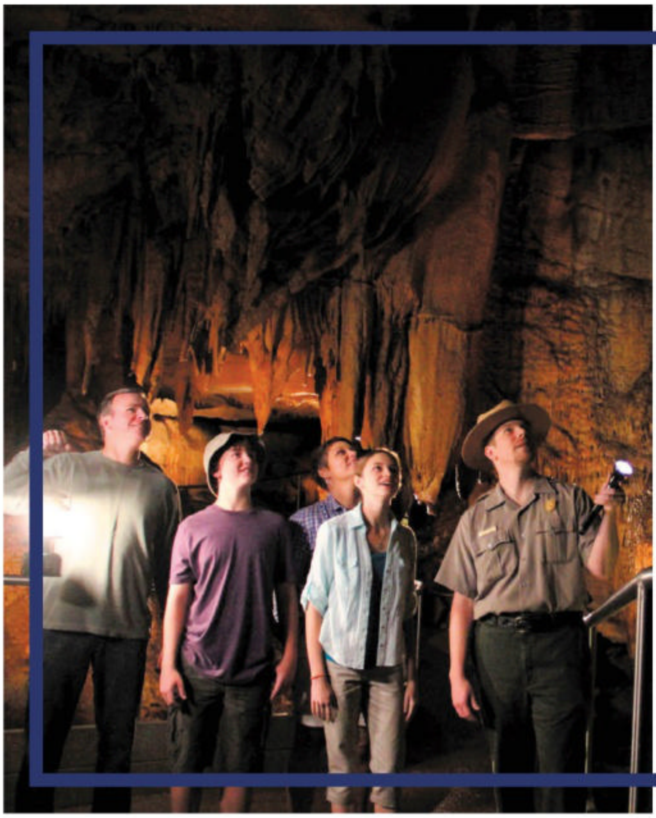

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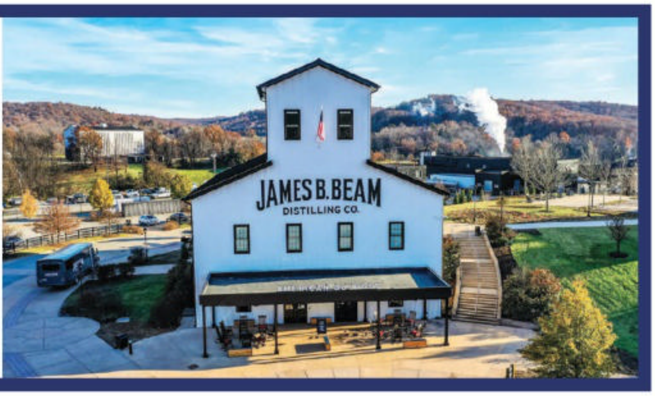

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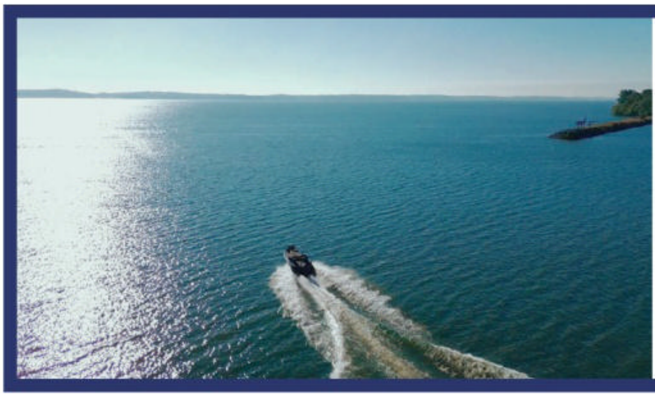

SUMMER ADVENTURES

Outdoor Fun in Marshall County

Memorial Day weekend is the official kickoff to summer at Kentucky Lake! Not to mention, May is prime for shallow bluegill and shellcracker fishing. Anglers can flip bushes or try topwater lures for largemouth or smallmouth bass as Kentucky Lake reaches its full summer pool. Book your stay now!

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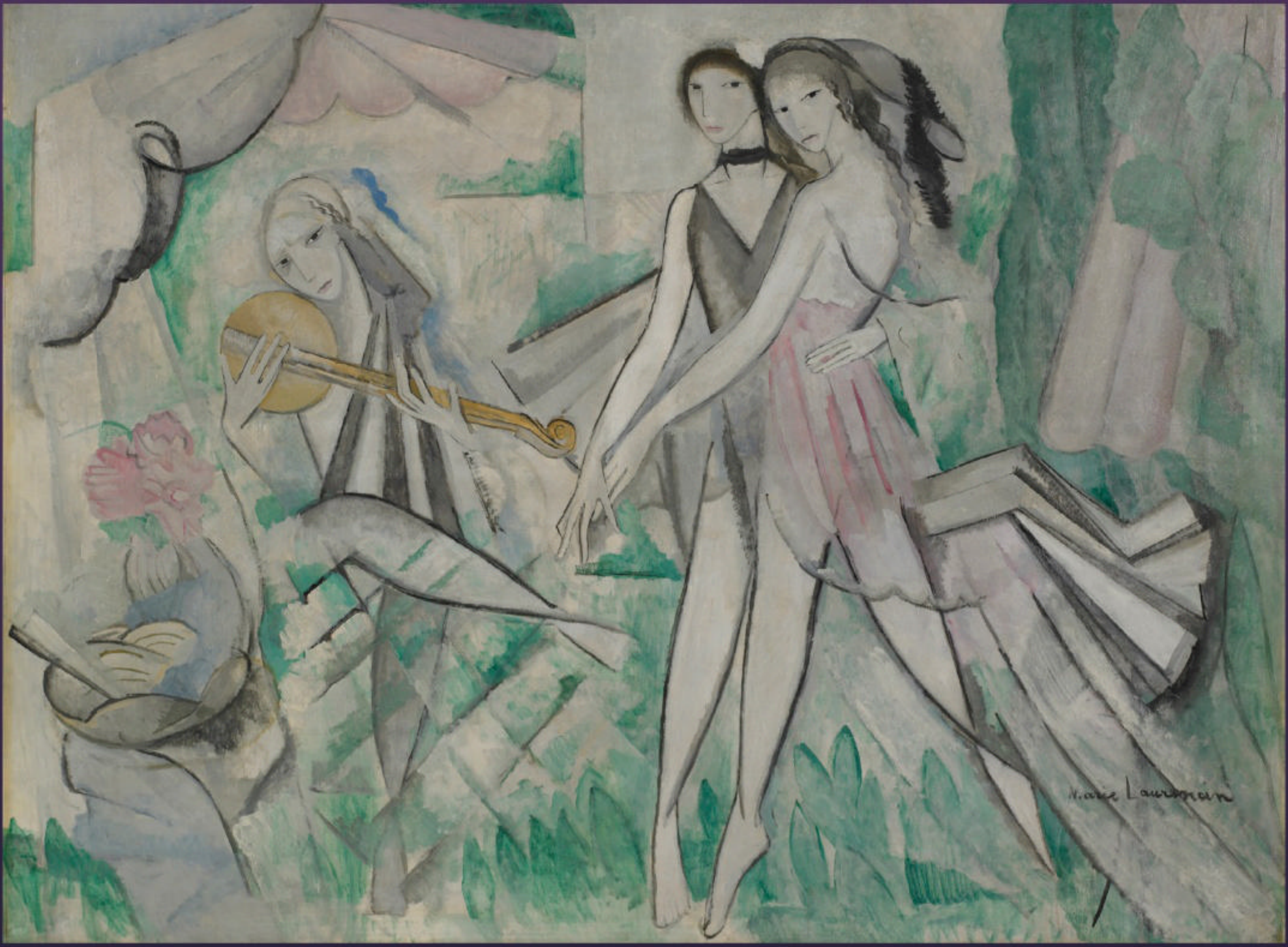
THE FIRST Homosexuals

THE BIRTH OF A NEW IDENTITY

1869-1939



MAY 2 – JULY 26, 2025

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WRIGHTWOOD
659
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With over 300 artworks from more than 100 museums and private collections around the world, the groundbreaking exhibition *The First Homosexuals* explores a sea change in how society regarded homosexuality in the wake of the coining of the term "homosexual" in 1869. Before this watershed moment, same-sex desire marked something you did, not necessarily something you were. *The First Homosexuals* examines how, for the first time, homosexuals were cleaved from the rest of the population and given an identity defined by their sexuality.

***The First Homosexuals: The Birth of a New Identity, 1869-1939* is presented at Wrightwood 659 by Alphawood Exhibitions.**
Image Credit: Marie Laurencin, *Le Bal élégant ou La Danse à la campagne,* 1913, 146 x 115 cm, © Fondation Foujita / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris 2024. Image © Musée Marie Laurencin.

ALPHAWOOD
FOUNDATION CHICAGO

THE 312

Blagojevich

Talking Points

This month's conversation starters

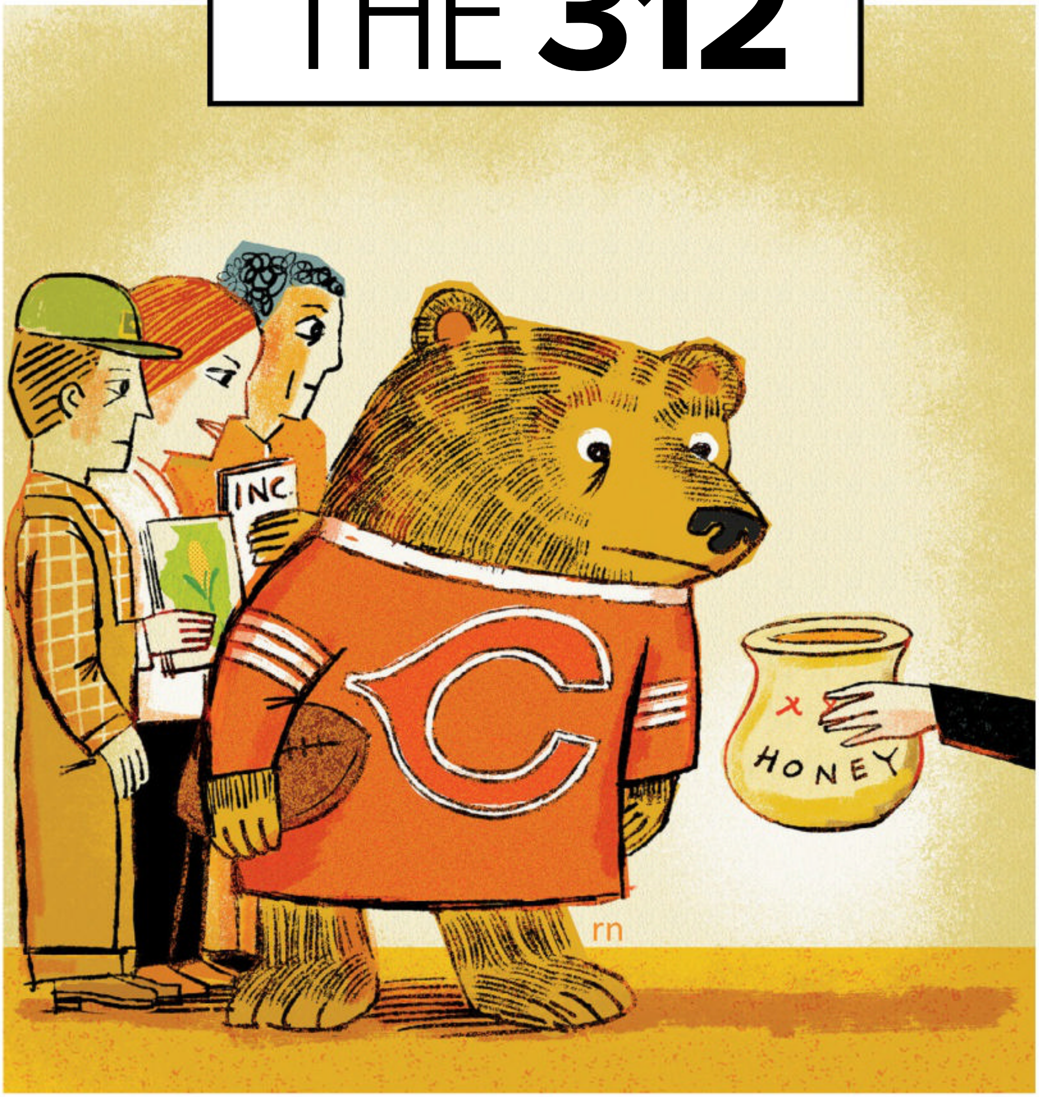
1 Five years after being disbarred by the Illinois Supreme Court, **Rod Blagojevich** is eligible to apply to get his law license back. His presidential pardon may not help, since reinstatement requires he demonstrate "good character."

2 Kevin M. Schultz, chair of UIC's history department, is out May 2 with the provocatively titled ***Why Everyone Hates White Liberals (Including White Liberals)***. Readers in Hyde Park will hate it.

3 Beginning May 7, your old driver's license will no longer get you on a domestic flight. You'll need a passport or **Real ID**, which can be obtained by appointment at a DMV or by walking in at the Real ID (only!) "supercenter" at 191 North Clark Street.

4 **Farmers' market season** starts this month. Division Street's opens May 17; Daley Plaza's, the 22nd. But sorry, you will have to wait until summer for your tomatoes.

PHOTOGRAPH: SCOTT OLSON/GETTY IMAGES



Hands Off, Indiana

Our neighbor to the east is trying to annex downstate counties and, worse, lure the Bears, whom we'd actually miss. By EDWARD McCLELLAND

INDIANA HAS AN INFERIORITY COMPLEX. AND FOR GOOD REASON. FITTING FOR A state known for doing things second best, its main claim to fame is that it's been home to the second-most vice presidents (six, behind New York's 11). It has a sort of big city, whose nickname is India-no-place, but the rest of the state is composed of small towns with little opportunity. "Hoosiers struggle desperately to prove to themselves and the world that they have a higher function than simply filling up the space between Chicago and Cincinnati," wrote Andrew Ferguson in his book *Land of Lincoln*.

In this attempt to stay relevant, Indiana has a long history of trying to poach businesses from Illinois. In the early 2010s, when Mike Pence was governor, the state placed a series of "Illinoyed?" billboards along Interstate 90, promoting what it claimed was Indiana's superior

Illustration by ROBERT NEUBECKER

business and regulatory environment. Among its prize recruits: manufacturer of plastic parts for fans and blowers and a packaged meat company.

The billboards are gone, but Indiana, which isn't satisfied with just being Indiana, is still after whatever it can take from Illinois. Lately, the state has been trying to steal land, residents, and even a beloved sports team from its more relevant neighbor to the west.

In February, the Indiana House of Representatives passed a bill to form the Indiana-Illinois Boundary Adjustment Commission, whose goal is to capitalize on downstate Illinois's disaffection by seizing some of that region. The sponsor, House Speaker Todd Huston, was moved to act when seven Illinois counties passed referendums in November to explore forming a state separate from Chicago. "We dug a little deeper and figured out that 33 counties have taken a similar vote," Huston said during a hearing. "If those 33 counties want to join our state, we welcome that." Why *would* they? Illinois's income tax is half again as high as Indiana's, and its property taxes are about triple, Huston pointed out. "To Illinois counties feeling unheard or unrepresented, we hear you, and we would like to welcome you to come back home again to Indiana."

His message resonated with at least one target resident. G.H. Merritt, founder of New Illinois, a group agitating for secession from Chicago, traveled from her home in Lake County to Indianapolis to testify in favor of the bill. "Illinois outside of Cook County has much more in common with Indiana," she told a legislative committee, admiring that Indiana has a budget surplus, while Illinois continues to "drown" in billions of dollars of pension debt.

Here in Illinois, state Representative Brad Halbrook, a Republican from Shelbyville, introduced his own bill to create an Illinois delegation to Indiana's boundary commission. Halbrook's home county, Shelby, overwhelmingly passed a referendum to look into seceding. He sees a more congenial political environment in Indiana, which has Republican supermajorities in both houses of its legislature. In Illinois, of course, the Chicago area dominates the rural hinterlands, while in Indiana small-town voters are in charge. "Most of Illinois is an agricultural state," Halbrook tells *Chicago*. "There's just a different lifestyle. Iowa, Illinois, Indiana – that's the Corn Belt. We have to have conversations to talk about these rural concerns."

Those include hot-button social and political issues. Scott Carpenter, a Hoosier who is a member of the group Downstate Illinois Secession, testified at the Indiana hearing about the need to free Illinoisans who don't live in the Chicago area from the state's "abortion centers, legal marijuana, and immigration sanctuary laws." He even suggested the states swap Lake County, Indiana, which already functions as a suburb of Chicago, for southern Illinois.

Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul is looking to put an end to all this talk. In response to news about Indiana, as well as Missouri, sniffing around our borders, his office felt compelled to issue a legal opinion stating that the downstate counties "do not have the authority to secede from the state of Illinois and join another state." Under the U.S. Constitution, a change in borders must be approved by both states and by Congress. Illinois Governor JB Pritzker has already called Indiana's annexation proposal "a stunt" carried out by "a low-wage state that doesn't protect workers, a state that does not provide health care for people when they're in need." Nice burn, JB.

"We are in the Chicago media market. Not all teams play where they're named: The New York Jets and Giants play in New Jersey."

–Indiana state Representative Earl Harris, who wants to bring the Bears to northwest Indiana

But would Pritzker's hometown of Chicago really miss southern Illinois? Probably not. Let's face it, the big city regards the rest of the state as an irrelevant agricultural appendage.

But here's what we *do* care about: The Hoosiers are also going after an institution central to our civic identity, the Bears. Another bill making its way through Indianapolis would create a professional sports development commission to lure a franchise to northwest Indiana. The sponsor, Representative Earl Harris of East Chicago, told *Chicago* that the region would take any pro team, but that the bill was drafted with the Bears' search for a new home in mind. Northwest Indiana, after all, is already Bears country. "We are in the Chicago media market," Harris says. "When you look at it on the national side, not all teams play where they're named: The New York Jets and Giants play in New Jersey."

This is not the first attempt that the region has made to swipe our NFL team. In 1995, a business group there proposed a $482 million stadium and entertainment complex to entice the Bears at a time when the team was demanding Chicago make upgrades to Soldier Field. For a short period, there was serious talk of a Gary Bears, but the plan fell apart when Lake County, Indiana, refused to levy a 0.5 percent income tax to fund a stadium. Back then, Bears fans rejected the idea of crossing state lines to watch their team, but Harris believes that improved South Shore Line service would draw them now. "People could take the train and watch professional sports and do their thing," he says.

While Huston and Harris see their efforts as merely Hoosier hospitality, this feels a lot more like Hoosier hijacking. If they want to build a bigger and better Indiana, one that's a destination and not just a drive-through, let them build it from inside the borders they were given.

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VOX

A History of Violence

Jens Ludwig questions everything you thought you knew about shootings.

Interview by PAULA KAMEN

IN CHICAGO, AS IN so many American cities, it's hard to imagine a more intractable public policy problem than gun violence. But University of Chicago Professor Jens Ludwig, 56, cofounder and director of the school's Crime Lab, delivers some hope in his groundbreaking new book, *Unforgiving Places: The Unexpected Origins of American Gun Violence*. Based on a wealth of scientific data on decision making by violent criminals and his own fieldwork in Chicago, he offers social policy strategies for transforming neighborhoods into safer spaces.

Q: What gave you the idea in 2007 to start the Crime Lab?

A: There was a doctoral student in chemistry at the University of Chicago named Amadou Cisse. That fall, about two weeks after he defended his dissertation, he was shot and killed about a block off campus. That led to a lot of conversation about how a university can be more helpful to our home city and to cities more generally. How do we nerds who specialize at looking at data make the world better? The answer we came up with is that government is really the 800-pound gorilla. The City of Chicago spends close to $20 billion a year, the state more than $50 billion, and the federal government trillions. Could we, as a research and development partner, help the public sector to spend its money in as socially effective a way as possible?

Q: A major case study in your book compares gun violence rates in Greater Grand Crossing with those in South Shore, which is a more commercially vibrant area.

A: They're two neighborhoods right across the street from one another on the South Side. The level of poverty and racial segregation is exactly the same. But Greater Grand Crossing has twice as many shootings per capita. Why is that? One of the things I point to is something [social theorist] Jane Jacobs noted 60-plus years ago: eyes on the street. It's really important to build neighborhoods that mix the commercial with the residential. When

Photograph by JEFF MARINI

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you have that, you have people walking around. You're going to get pizza for dinner with your family. You're going to the hardware store to get some nails. And Jane Jacobs could see that was strongly correlated with the rates of violence.

Q: I was surprised when you wrote that, unlike with robberies, only 20 percent of acts of gun violence are for material gain.

A: Yep, I was surprised the first time I saw the data, too. We're used to thinking about gun violence from *The Wire*, where Snoop and Chris Partlow are going to do a hit over some drug-selling turf. But most shootings in Chicago and other cities are not motivated by economic considerations, and they're not premeditated. They are lively, in-the-moment arguments that veer sideways and end in tragedy because someone's got a gun. The motivation is fleeting, though. And if you had someone around to step in and de-escalate the situation, then you can prevent the shooting from happening. A few years ago in South Shore, a 17-year-old named Kalvin Carter shot and killed a 16-year-old named Jamal Lockett in an argument over a used bike that might perhaps fetch $50. It's hard to make sense of someone being willing to risk a long spell in prison, which Carter is now serving, for such a trivial gain. It's much easier to imagine that Carter's fast-thinking self led him to conclude, Literally nothing is worse than letting this guy make me look like a coward in front of all my friends. The question for public policy is, How do we give the slow-thinking self a better chance of stepping in?

Q: In the book, you describe the limits of conventional approaches to reducing gun violence. From the left, the strategy has been to try to address root causes of poverty and desperation, which, of course, is a slow process. And from the right, it's been "lock 'em up," with incarceration rates skyrocketing.

A: The "lock 'em up" trend in the United States started in the 1970s around the time people became skeptical that crime prevention was possible. It wasn't a crazy perspective given what we knew in the '70s. The prevention we'd been trying was focused on the slow-thinking rational mind: "If we get people a better job that will incentivize them to not get thrown in jail, that will be our solution." There's lots of evidence to suggest it totally works for preventing property crime, but not so much for violent crime. Also, there's good evidence now to suggest that really long prison sentences are not a very good return from a public safety perspective. The difference between a 40-year sentence and a 30-year sentence, that extra 10 years, does not do much to deter more shootings. Let's take the money that we save there and pour that into some kind of evidence-based prevention program.

> **"Most shootings are not motivated by economic considerations. They are in-the-moment arguments that veer sideways."**

Q: You write that both New York City and Los Angeles have gotten their gun violence rates down significantly using programs based on principles of behavioral economics.

A: What those cities were the first to do was look at the data and see if we can find out when and where the gun violence is most likely and then try to concentrate our police resources there. One example here in Chicago: There's a liquor store on the South Side that stays open later than most. All of a sudden you have people from different neighborhoods and different gangs who are liquored up congregating in the same place. You can look at the data and see, Oh, at that spot there's always shootings at 3 or 4 in the morning. Maybe we put a cop there. Maybe we ask the liquor store to hire extra security for that time. Maybe we ask the liquor store to close at the same time as the others. The second thing Los Angeles and New York City did: They were early and rapid adopters of community violence intervention. These are community nonprofits that try to figure out when and where shootings are going to happen and basically mediate that. Some of these programs also work with people *in advance* of conflicts to teach them how to navigate these situations. Both strategies hold real promise.

Q: You think that relieving gun violence can also uproot fundamental causes of poverty.

A: Exactly. The city gave millions of dollars to Whole Foods to open a store in Englewood. But it's very, very hard to get people to go to Englewood to shop at Whole Foods when they're worried about the gun violence. That illustrates that gun violence is a huge headwind for community development, economic development. And so I have come to think of gun violence as the social problem that sits upstream of almost every other social problem facing Chicago and other American cities. If you can get the gun violence under control, you can have neighborhoods that are thriving, that people and businesses are moving into. That creates tax revenue that then helps you do all the other things you want to do: fix the schools, strengthen the social safety net, strengthen the mental health delivery system, improve infrastructure, and on and on. We spend a lot of time in the United States appropriately worried about inequality of income and wealth. We don't spend nearly enough time worrying about inequality in something even more fundamental, which is public safety.

Q: Beyond data, you illustrate the problem with scenes from your ride-alongs with Chicago police. What did you learn from that?

A: How fragile and vulnerable the human body is to firearm violence. The first time I saw someone who had been shot, it was in a back alley in Garfield Park. It really does change you to realize that we are just walking around unprotected against these insanely high-velocity metal projectiles that we've made very easy for people to fire against one another. Intellectually, I obviously know it, but when you see a human being lying in a back alley in Garfield Park, it just hits you viscerally.

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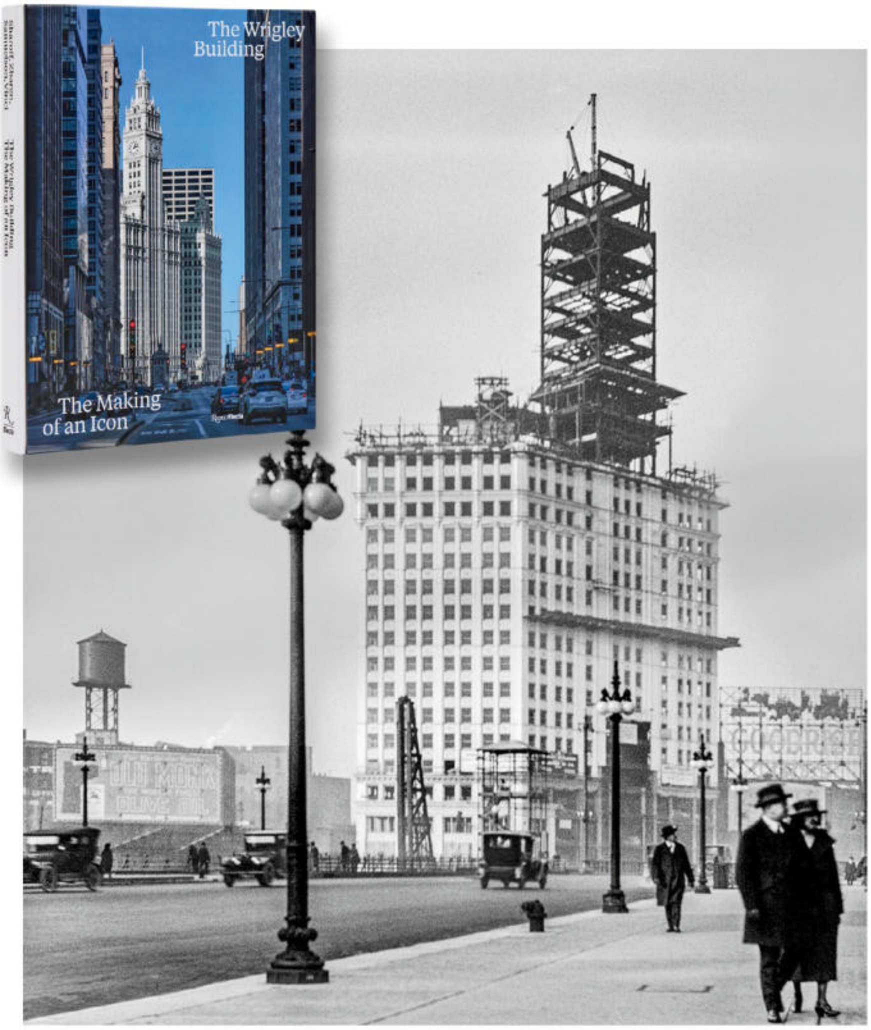
FIVE THINGS

A Castle Made From Gum

A faulty clock. An aerial shortcut. Second-floor jam sessions. Here's what we learned from a new book about the history of the iconic Wrigley Building. By ROBERT LOERZEL



1 The Wrigley Building put the "magnificent" in the Magnificent Mile.
That moniker for North Michigan Avenue wouldn't be coined until the 1940s, but the glitzy corridor began taking shape with the completion in 1921 of the building's south tower, the stretch's first major structure, a year after the Michigan Avenue Bridge opened. "As the first person to erect a new building on the north side of the river, [Wrigley Company founder William Wrigley Jr.] got the best site at the lowest cost," Chicago architectural author Robert Sharoff writes in *The Wrigley Building: The Making of an Icon*.

2 People compared the new building to a castle and a ship.
Architect Charles Gerhard Beersman's trapezoidal Beaux-Arts south tower, Chicago's tallest building when it was completed, "functions almost as a prism, with different views from different directions," Sharoff writes. Observing it in 1921 from a mile to the south, a journalist noted how "one can see the tower in all the airy grace of its many pinnacles and turrets much as one might glimpse the towers of some distant castle set on a rock." But viewed from the north, it looked more like "a huge, sharp dominating prow" to another writer, who added: "It seems to cut the air and to be slowly bearing down on the spectator with an awful majesty quite overpowering."

3 The signature clock kept poor time at first.
The building sports Chicago's biggest and tallest timepiece, but the original gear mechanism had accuracy issues. The book quotes a ticked-off Chicagoan in 1922: "Darn that Wrigley clock. Every time I see it pointing to 20 minutes of six when I know it's half-past nine it makes me so darned mad I just spit my wad of gum right out." The problems included "a windswept site that sometimes made the wooden hands slap against the dial's terra-cotta face," local historian Tim Samuelson writes in one of his commentaries in the book. The gears were eventually replaced with a more accurate electric system.

4 The skyway was put in to save Wrigley Company workers some steps.
The north tower was added in 1924, but the 14th-floor pedestrian bridge connecting it with the original tower wasn't constructed until 1931. Why then? "The Wrigley Company's corporate offices on the south tower's 14th floor had outgrown its quarters," Samuelson writes. "Rather than expanding to other floors—thus encumbering employees with the time-consuming inconvenience of stairs and elevators—it was decided that a bridge connecting to the north tower would be built."

5 The building was a cultural hot spot last century.
Its tenants in the 20th century were predominantly commercial and fine artists, radio stations (including WBBM and WIND), and advertising firms, such as J. Walter Thompson, which occupied all or part of seven floors in the 1960s. The Wrigley Building Restaurant "was one of the great social fishbowls of its era, a place to see and be seen," Sharoff writes. In Studio 12 on the second floor, a who's who of musicians made recordings for Columbia Records: Benny Goodman, Peggy Lee, Cab Calloway, Woody Herman, Gene Krupa, Big Bill Broonzy, Big Joe Williams, and Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys, who recorded "Blue Moon of Kentucky" here in 1946. **C**

PHOTOGRAPHY: (WRIGLEY BUILDING) COURTESY WILLIAM ZBAREN; (BOOK) RIZZOLI

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NORTH OF NORMAL
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LINCOLN PARK

DATING EXPERT AND PODCAST HOST BELA GANDHI RECOMMENDS THESE FOUR SPOTS.

> SUMMER HOUSE SANTA MONICA
"I am a summer girl, but this restaurant makes me happy whether it's January or July. I basically have a permanent table. I love their red wine selection and the Brussels sprouts salad with chicken." *1954 N. Halsted St.*

> CALVIN TRAN
"I discovered this designer's clothes in New York, but he's got a store right in my neighborhood. He was on Bravo's *The Fashion Show: Ultimate Collection* and has this modern, minimalist style. If I walk in, I'm walking out with five things." *2120 N. Halsted St.*

> OZ PARK
"I raised my kids at this park. It's got great shady spots, a nice playground, tennis courts. If it's over 55 degrees, I'm walking here while doing phone coaching sessions. It's where I have my best ideas." *2021 N. Burling St.*

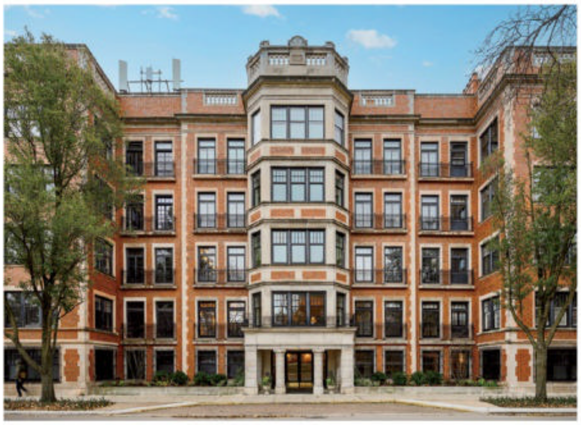
> MAISON PARISIENNE
"This café is such a pretty, girly place. Their turmeric lattes with oat milk have the perfect amount of foam." *901 W. Armitage Ave.* –INTERVIEW BY JUDY SUTTON TAYLOR

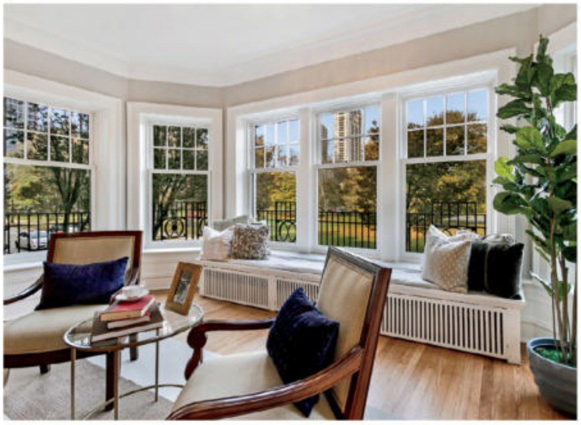
LISTING OF THE MONTH

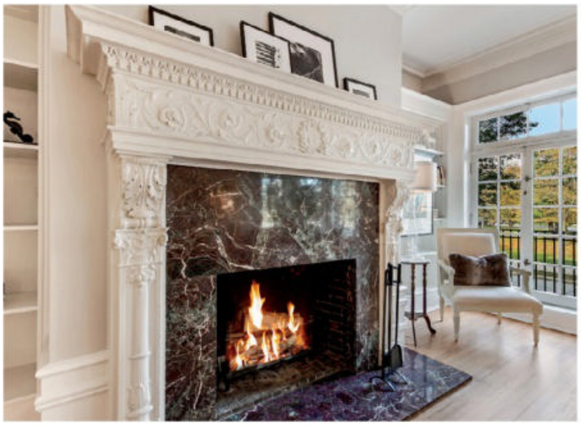
Swedish Delight

At 108 years old, this sunlit and spacious Lincoln Park condo is forever young.

By THOMAS CONNORS







NEXT TO THE BUNGALOW, nothing epitomizes Chicago's everyday cityscape quite like the courtyard apartment. Yet as ubiquitous as these U-shaped buildings are, they weren't the only game in town during the first burst of multiunit residential construction here, between the tail end of the 19th century and the eve of the Depression. One example: the Aztec, at 305 West Fullerton Parkway, where a four-bedroom unit is for sale at $1.85 million.

Situated where the Aztec Tennis Club once stood, the building was designed by Andrew Sandegren, who did his share of courtyard buildings around town. Born in Sweden, Sandegren arrived stateside at 21 before opening his Chicago office in 1893. *History of the Swedes of Illinois*, published in 1908, notes that Sandegren made "a specialty of high grade work," which included "many of the handsomest apartment buildings in Chicago." Less flattering attention came his way in 1923, when, after a well-oiled conversation turned to religion, he fired a gun at a friend, wounding him in the chest and shoulder. Sandegren, whom the police found cowering in his bed, didn't have to live with his shame for long; he died the following year.

Built in 1917, the four-story Aztec sports classic good looks spun of red brick, decorative ironwork, and casement windows that open to Juliet balconies. Unit 1E, measuring 3,700 square feet and equipped with four full bathrooms, features a coffered ceiling in the dining room and a fireplace with a highly ornamented surround and mantel in the living room. While an engaging, old-school vibe pervades the home, the public rooms, including a sunroom strung with seven windows overlooking Lincoln Park, flow on an almost open plan, which gives the residence an up-to-date air. As the Swedes say, "Away is good, but home is best."

PHOTOGRAPHY: (GANDHI) AJ KANE; (HOME EXTERIOR) COMPASS/BUSBY GROUP; (INTERIOR) TERE PROCTOR/THE PROCTOR GROUP

THE REGIMEN

Alison Victoria

HGTV rehabber, Lagree lover, candy craver

By WEB BEHRENS

AS HOST OF HGTV'S HIT interior design show *Windy City Rehab*, Alison Victoria has a busy shooting schedule, so she keeps her workouts tight. To that end, she invested in her own Lagree M3 Megaformers for her homes here and in Las Vegas, allowing her to do Pilates-inspired high-intensity workouts at her convenience. Victoria, 44, studied interior architecture and psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. That combination comes in handy when rehabbing homes, a job that sometimes requires playing therapist with clients. Her Logan Square home is a warehouse she converted and documented on HGTV. Later this year, she'll host the spinoff series *Sin City Rehab*, letting the world in on what happens in Vegas.

LAGREET THE DAY
"I wake up at 8 a.m. and go right into my home gym for my Lagree workout. It's 45 minutes. I've got big gumballs in my gym, and I shove a couple of those in for a sugar rush. I started doing only Lagree a year and a half ago and ended up losing 10 pounds."

BROWNIE POINTS
"Right after my workout, I do my vitamin routine and my protein shake. I add BeautyLux Multi Collagen powder to my FlavCity shake, which has grass-fed whey. I love the brownie batter flavor. It's so good, I just mix it with water. I have been through every single protein drink and powder, and this is, hands down, the best-tasting one."

CANDY CRUSH
"On set, I have roasted red pepper egg white bites. I don't eat anything else for breakfast or lunch. Pretty much every night, I eat steak: a wagyu rib eye with salt, pepper, a little bit of butter, and rosemary. I make a little salad with romaine lettuce and garbanzo beans. I also love candy so much. Maybe it's because I was born on Halloween? Like, I'm a full candy freak. Last night I fell asleep eating Red Vines."

ON THE WELLNESS WAGON
"What we put in is what we get out. That's the biggest reason I gave up alcohol eight months ago. My skin's never looked better, and my overall happiness is better, too. You know, some people use all the best lotions but drink a gallon of wine a night, and they look like hell. Beauty, health, and wellness all start from within. Ultimately, my goal is to live forever and look damn good doing it."

PHOTOGRAPHY: (STEAK) ANTONIOTRUZZI/GETTY IMAGES; (WINE) DENPHUMI/GETTY IMAGES; (X SYMBOL) MIRONOV KONSTANTIN/GETTY IMAGES

Photograph by BETHANY PAIGE

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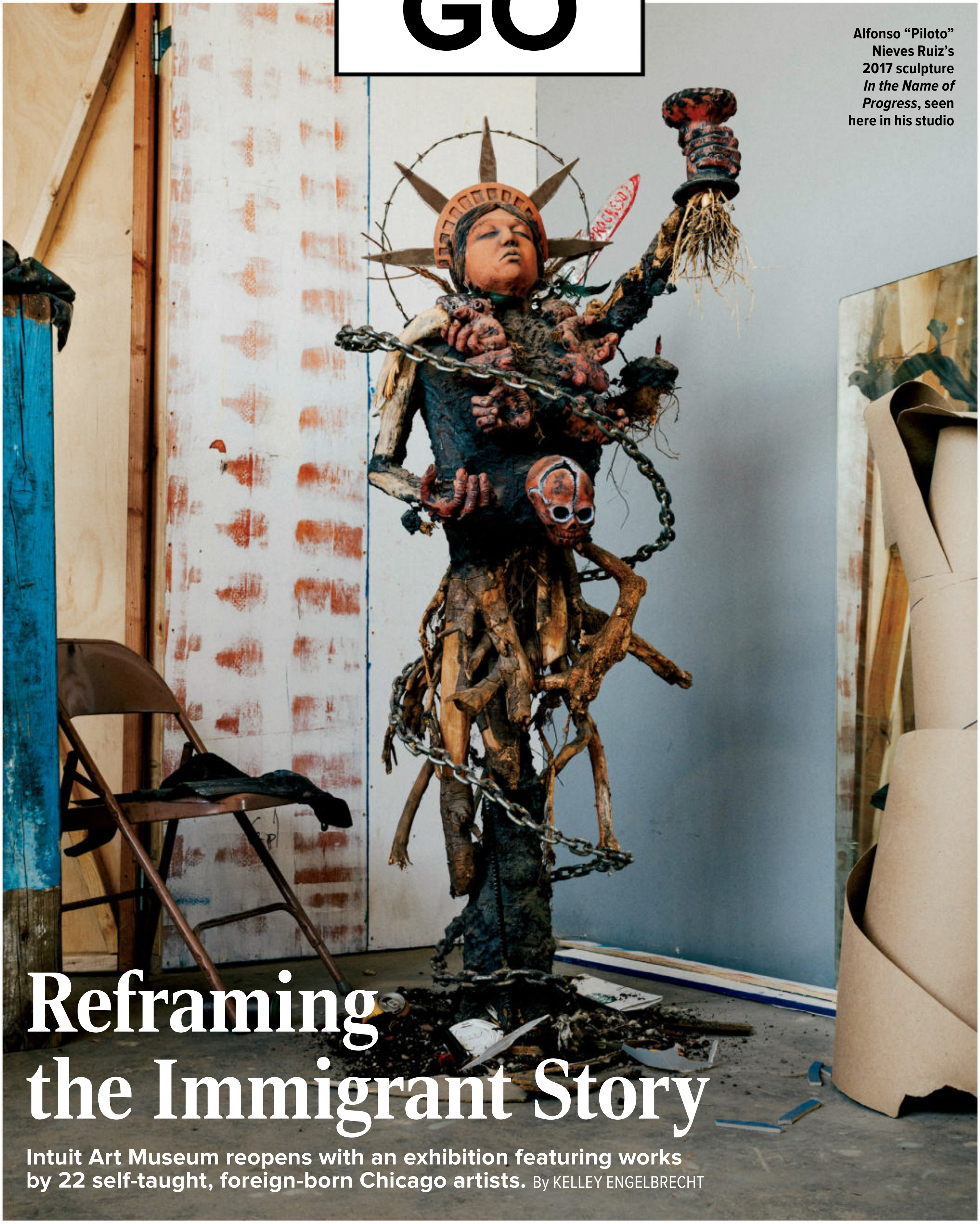


Alfonso "Piloto" Nieves Ruiz's 2017 sculpture *In the Name of Progress*, seen here in his studio

Reframing the Immigrant Story

Intuit Art Museum reopens with an exhibition featuring works by 22 self-taught, foreign-born Chicago artists. By KELLEY ENGELBRECHT

Photograph by LYNDON FRENCH

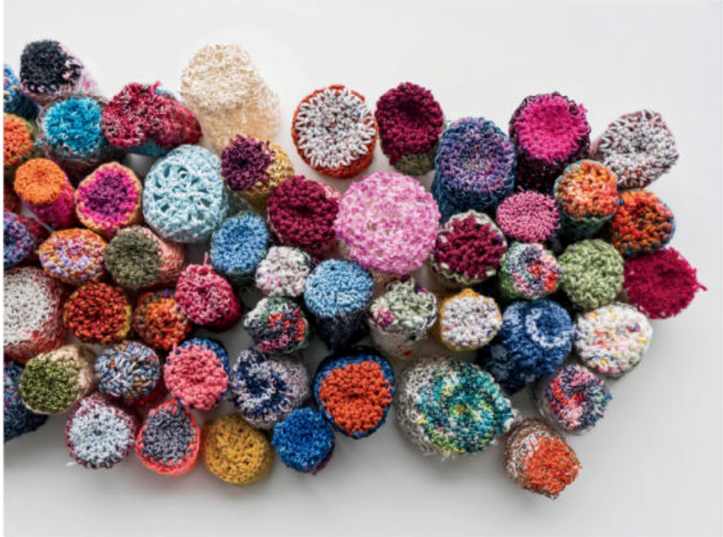
HISTORY TELLS US THAT great artistic movements beget great artists, but Intuit Art Museum has been challenging this idea for decades by asking, "Who gets to make great art?"

Formerly known as the Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, the River West institution reopens May 23 after a 20-month, $10 million renovation, with the pithier name, triple the space, and an intriguing exhibition, *Catalyst: Im/migration and Self-Taught Art in Chicago*. Running through early next year, it showcases 92 works by 22 Chicago artists from 1930 to the present – an apt homage to the city's early championing of outsider art, a genre that is approachable yet difficult to define. Museum president and CEO Debra Kerr describes it simply as work by "untrained creators." It's a movement that declares, audaciously, that art can be found anywhere and be made by anyone.

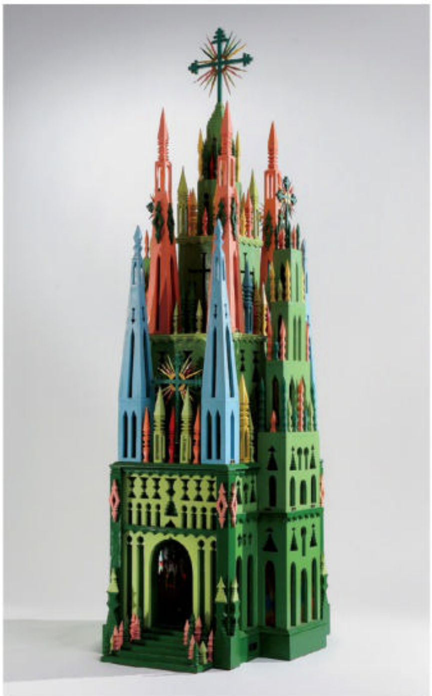
"There's so much important work happening in spaces like public libraries, the park district, and artists' homes," says Alison Amick, Intuit's chief curator. "These were artists who were making their own paths to create and work, looking for opportunities to build community and exhibit their art."

The show provides a timely exploration of the impact immigrants have had on the city's culture scene. Even so, *Catalyst* is more of a celebration than a political message: This is our city; these are our people. Look around you – art is everywhere.

Here are three of the artists featured in the exhibition.



Pittie's 2024 work *Be in Softness*, seen here in detail, stretches eight feet across in full; Warner's *Cathedral III* (below), circa 1955, stands four feet tall.



■ ALFONSO "PILOTO" NIEVES RUIZ

The 49-year-old has long used art to give language to his experiences, whether as a child growing up in a working-class neighborhood of Querétaro, Mexico; as an undocumented immigrant arriving in Chicago in 1996; or today, as the chef-owner of Zentli, a Mexican restaurant in Evanston. "I did art as a way of cleansing myself from all the things I couldn't say," Nieves Ruiz notes. Made with clay and discarded objects, his sculptures examine how in our attempts to further society we end up destroying ourselves. In his *In the Name of Progress* (shown on the previous page), Lady Liberty is represented as an Indigenous woman; chains encircle her body, severing her from the nourishment of Mother Earth.

■ POOJA PITTIE

Growing up in Mumbai, India, Pittie was always making art. But it wasn't until 2016, after completing her MBA at the University of Chicago, that she decided instead to fully embrace her passion as a painter and fiber artist. Pittie's deeply personal work reflects her reality as a woman with a progressive form of muscular dystrophy. Her *Be in Softness* contains more than 240 knit vessels, each containing a handwritten message that expresses her doubts, fears, and questions. "A lot of the notes are tied to how I'm living as a disabled woman in this city," says Pittie, 48. The work is both a conversation and a meditation, juxtaposing the difficulties of a body that's slowing down with the tenderness of simply being.

■ CHARLES WARNER

Warner immigrated to the U.S. when he was 16, but his artistic era didn't begin until he retired from a career as a carpenter and began woodworking in his garage. The Mundelein craftsman, who died in 1964 at around the age of 80, spent the last nine years of his life creating intricate, vibrantly colored, large-scale models of cathedrals reminiscent of his childhood in Poland. Using a jackknife and jigsaw, he hand-carved his structures, then meticulously painted them and even wired them for electricity. Even in their impressive specificity – small chandeliers hang above the altars, miniature pews line the naves – the cathedrals aren't replicas. They are reflections of memory, an innate expression of his heritage. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: (PITTIE) ROBERT CHASE HEISHMAN; (WARNER) MARK WIDHALM

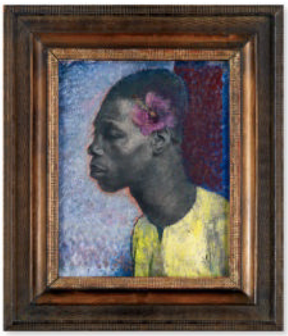
AGENDA

Top 10 reasons to fill up your calendar this month

By WEB BEHRENS

BRASS ACTS

Get your oompah on when Chicago's own marching band/spectacle theater collective Mucca Pazza celebrates International Tuba Day at Martyrs'. *May 2. muccapazza.com*



ECCE HOMO

Curated by historian Jonathan D. Katz, *The First Homosexuals: The Birth of a New Identity, 1869–1939* uses art from 40 countries to illustrate how coining a label for same-sex desire shaped cultural perceptions of sexuality. *May 2–July 26. wrightwood659.org*

SPRITE OF SPRING

Winding down its eighth season with a flourish, the buzzy South Chicago Dance Theatre presents *In/Within*, a world premiere choreographed by Kia S. Smith. *May 3. auditoriumtheatre.org*

MODERN-DAY MAESTRO

Contemporary composer Max Richter performs with a string quartet at Symphony Center. The program includes his *Blue Notebooks*, containing the evocative and haunting "On the Nature of Daylight." *May 6. cso.org*

THEY'RE GONNA SING IT AGAIN

Traverse the road to hell with Orpheus and Eurydice once more when *Hadestown* returns. Maybe it *will* work out this time? *May 6–18. broadwayinchicago.com*

THREE MOMS WALK INTO A WINE BAR

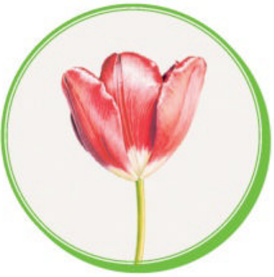
The standup is tailor-made for matriarchs whenever Bad Momz of Comedy, led by local comic Orly K.G., take the mic. *May 7. citywinery.com*

STALINGÄNGER

A brainy new satire by playwright Dianne Nora gets its Chicago premiere at A Red Orchid Theatre: *Six Men Dressed Like Joseph Stalin* follows a Stalin body double and his handler. *May 8–June 22. aredorchidtheatre.org*

MAKE OUR GARDEN GLOW

The touring exhibition *Rory McEwen: A New Perspective on Nature* shows how the Scot brought 20th-century style to dusty botanical art. *May 16–Aug. 17. driehausmuseum.org*



THERE'S GOTTA BE BETTER WAYS TO ESCAPE L.A.

Chicago Shakes teams up again with the *Six* producers to deliver *42 Balloons*, a musical about the daredevil who floated 16,000 feet above Los Angeles in a lawn chair. *May 24–June 29. chicagoshakes.com*

DO POPPERS COME IN PINK?

All-star drag-queen musician Trixie Mattel works the DJ decks at the Salt Shed during *Solid Pink Disco: Blonde Edition*. Pro tip: Wear fuchsia. *May 29. trixiemattel.com*

PHOTOGRAPHY: (TUBA) CHAD LEVERENZ; (FRAMED ART) DANIEL KATZ GALLERY; (DANCER) MICHELLE REID; (*HADESTOWN*) EVAN ZIMMERMAN; (FLOWER) RORY MCEWEN; (MATTEL) JON SAMS

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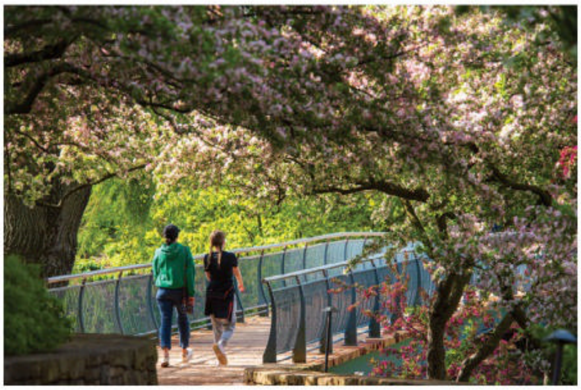

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TABLE

Scott
Kevin

Scott Kitsmiller and Kevin Beary

Classics Elevated

Gus' Sip & Dip delivers updated cocktail faves and a fab ham sandwich. By AMY CAVANAUGH

Photography by JEFF MARINI

The grasshopper

C LASSICS ARE CLASSICS FOR a reason. But at Gus' Sip & Dip, the new River North cocktail bar from beverage director Kevin Beary and bar manager Scott Kitsmiller, classic cocktails are rethought with such a laser focus that they can make you think about a drink you've imbibed for years in a whole new way. Take the gin gimlet. Typically made with equal parts Rose's lime juice and gin, here it's made with gin, housemade lime cordial, and a drop of absinthe that fully opens the drink up. "The gin gimlet is a staff favorite," Kitsmiller says.

The menu at Gus', located at 51 West Hubbard Street, offers 30 cocktails, and while you'll find well-known drinks like White Russians and Cosmopolitans, other classics will be new to many, like a Cameron's Kick. But what they all have in common: Each is perfectly dialed in. For instance, the dirty martini is made with a brine of gordal olives blended with salt solution and distilled vinegar. It's topped with shaved ice for that "chippy ice feeling you get from a well-shaken martini," Beary says. The grasshopper is also a must-try. "It's a drink the Midwest does so well, and we wanted to elevate it," Kitsmiller says. Here the team adds green Chartreuse and finishes the cocktail by shaving an Andes mint over the top. "We wanted it to be one of those drinks where people ask, 'Have you had the grasshopper at Gus'?' "

There's much for cocktail geeks to explore, but the most talked about part of Gus' is the price, a very affordable $12 per drink. Beary (who is also the beverage director at Three Dots and a Dash) and Kitsmiller (another Three Dots veteran) reimagined the menu at R.J. Grunts in 2023, creating a list of cheap classics, which are just $5 during happy hour. That experience laid the groundwork for Gus'. As Beary says, "We realized that the demand was going to be there."

And the demand definitely *is* there. On a recent Friday night, the wait for seats was two and a half hours – not exactly the plan. "We were hoping it would be accessible at all times," Beary says. To avoid the line, arrive when it opens at 4 p.m. (bonus: the $6 daily cocktail from 4 to 5 p.m.) or visit later on a weeknight.

That wait speaks to a craving for two things mostly lacking in today's cocktail landscape: affordable drinks and an emphasis on classics. "We're seeing it really resonate with a younger crowd, but we're also seeing an older crowd absolutely championing this," Beary says. To achieve that $12 price point, the team uses just 38 types of booze, which allows for bulk purchasing, while making juices and syrups in-house.

You'll find lots of folks dining early at Gus'. No surprise: Although the food items are pricier, the menu is robust. Among the standouts: a shrimp cocktail ($23), served with crudités, spicy cocktail sauce, and Louis dressing, and a savory smoked ham dip ($23), a brown-sugar-glazed pork roast sandwich on Spanish pan de cristal bread with mustard jus for dunking. While the cocktails are the star, having good eats was also important to the team, since Gus' is a neighborhood bar at heart. Says Beary: "Serving food consistently and late are things that good bars do." C

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Personal Space

Longtime chef Lamar Moore opens his own place with a menu that speaks to his history.

By AMY CAVANAUGH

THE MENU AT ETC., THE NEW LOOP PLACE FROM LAMAR MOORE, SERVES as an archive of the celebrated chef's culinary life experiences. Seasoned fried chicken skins, served with steak tartare, nod to the Southern gas station snacks he used to eat while traveling as a chef for the Bears. A whole fish, dressed with a sauce that includes soy sauce, ginger, and Thai chiles, reflects the time he spent cooking at the Peruvian restaurant Tanta and the seafood giant McCormick & Schmick's. His deviled eggs are based on the relish-loaded versions his mother and grandmother made when he was a kid, but with twists: cornichons, truffle oil, and caviar, which, he says, "flex on my steakhouse background."

The longtime Chicago chef (most recently at Bronzeville Winery), who has also worked in Las Vegas and San Jose, is striking out on his own for the first time with Etc., which opened in December. "I make food that expresses what Southern food means to me," says the Beverly native, who in January was named a semifinalist for the James Beard Award for best chef in the Great Lakes region. Take the purple heirloom corn grits. "People are used to seeing grits with shrimp or catfish. I make an oxtail patty, pan-sear it, and serve it with red wine demi-glace and crispy onions."

Brunch is in the works, a savvy move considering Etc. has resonated as a neighborhood spot. "I walk down the street and people know who I am," says Moore, a frequent culinary show competitor. "You feel different when you own it." *404 S. Wells St.*

Ask the Dining Editor

What are your favorite spots for seafood?
For being so far from an ocean, Chicago is a sneaky-good seafood town. Freshly shucked oysters are everywhere—Obélix does a particularly nice job with them; I love their oysters Rockefeller. And I'm always game for the seafood at Mariscos San Pedro and Shaw's Crab House. But my new favorite for fish is Brasero, where I had a delicious meal of grilled prawns with charred green onion salsa and a whole branzino with coconut chile crisp.

Do you have any go-to vendors at Green City Market?
I'm a devoted goer of the Wednesday morning farmers' market in Lincoln Park, which returns for the season May 7. I always hit Nichols Farm & Orchard for veggies, Mick Klüg Farms for berries and jams, and Verzênay for baked treats (if you see the raspberry-rose croissant, don't skip it).
–AMY CAVANAUGH

Email Amy at acavanaugh@chicagomag.com with your burning dining questions.

ILLUSTRATION: GREG CLARKE

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REVIEW

Roman Holiday

At Il Carciofo, Joe Flamm's exploration of the Eternal City's cuisine makes for a glam but uneven excursion.

By JOHN KESSLER

IF YOU ORDER THE RIGATONI alla amatriciana at Il Carciofo, the cook starts with a handful of diced guanciale, cured pork jowl that looks like bacon but has a far denser texture. Over a flame it renders quickly – the fat liquefies while the flesh shrinks into porky pebbles. The cook tips white wine into the pan, and as it all simmers, the guanciale turns toothsome. Tomato purée goes in next, along with a pinch of red pepper, a splash of cooking water, and the rigatoni. It all comes together in a glossy, depth-charged sauce that doesn't so much coat the pasta as meld with it. The dish is a triumph.

This is the kind of cooking Il Carciofo's chef-owner, Joe Flamm, does so well. He takes a familiar – even overplayed – recipe, then shows you what it can and should be. I'm assuming you know Flamm. If you've managed to secure a reservation here, you're surely a fan. You watched this big, blue-eyed 38-year-old with his boyish face and familiar South Side accent lose on *Top Chef* only to come back through a Last Chance Kitchen challenge to vanquish every other contestant and take home the trophy. Perhaps you loved him at Spiaggia, where he served as Tony Mantuano's executive chef, or you lined up early at Rose Mary, his first West Loop restaurant, to snag a bar seat as soon as the doors opened. Flamm earned his fame first by being a manifestly genuine person and then by rewarding his admirers with real food prepared with care.

While Rose Mary focused on the Adriatic fare of eastern Italy and Croatia, Il Carciofo explores the traditions of Roman trattorias. This style offers many familiar reference points, from cacio e pepe to the fried artichokes that give this restaurant its name. I find it an easy restaurant to like and one that I may learn to love once it finds its groove. Because so much of the food comes together *à la minute*, the kitchen team needs to figure out timing so that every plate goes out as baller as that rigatoni. Likewise, the front of the house has to learn to work this rugby pitch of a room, which has a dining bar, a bar bar, and an always-in-use private room. Il Carciofo has been packed from day one, so expect service that's friendly, if mechanical, and occasionally out of sync.

The staff offers one boss move that I wish more restaurants would adopt: The reserved table is yours as soon as the first guest arrives – no squishing into the front vestibule waiting for "all members of your party." Not to humblebrag, but I got there first once and had time to admire this boisterous space with its open kitchen extending the length of the back wall. When I wandered toward the back looking for the restroom, I passed the now de rigueur Italian restaurant design flourish: a glass-walled pasta lab. The vibe isn't homey trattoria as much as Chicago glam, but that's OK. That's why we come to the West Loop.

Arriving early also allowed me time with beverage director Kyle Davidson's drinks list. The cocktail menu is divided into aperitivi (refreshing drinks to enjoy before dinner, such as spritzes), misti (mixed drinks like a rose cardamom Collins that gets a tang from grappa), and digestivi (strong potions best sipped

Photography by JEFF MARINI

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Joe Flamm

Rigatoni alla carbonara

after the meal). Here you'll find one of Davidson's signatures, the Art of Choke, which he first devised for the Violet Hour nearly two decades ago. It involves rum, green Chartreuse, lime, and the artichoke amaro Cynar. Talk about on brand.

I'm thrilled with the variety of lambruscos (chillable sparkling reds, both sweet and dry) the menu proposes. The pale Paltrinieri Radice is like drinking rhubarb, and it loves all the appetizers we're passing around the table: fingers of fried salt cod clad in jackets of crunchy batter with lemon aïoli; slips of swordfish crudo with fennel and orange; and fried rice balls (suppli) oozing beef ragu and mozzarella.

In some cases I found myself liking a dish but wanting more oomph, like the signature carciofi alla giudia, deep-fried artichokes named for their origin in Rome's Jewish quarter. The kitchen did a decent job with the frying, getting the leaves as brittle as phyllo while keeping the heart creamy, but they just didn't give good in-season artichoke. Where did Flamm source this spring vegetable in the middle of winter? From Italy, he says, which may be why two small specimens cost $14.

Standout dishes, though, elevate every meal here. For us, those were a spinach and ricotta ravioli better than any in memory and a duo of roast pork belly and loin, the latter draped in so much brilliant salsa verde that I kept looking for the phantom bread basket. Next time I'll order it alongside the Roman-style rosso pizza, a crispy and airy oblong thing painted with sauce and dusted with Parm.

Yet for every liftoff, there's a return to earth. The only salad on the menu, a Tuscan kale number, was there for the folks who gotta have a Caesar, while lamb ribs in vin santo would've satisfied more had one not been a bone with barely any meat. A tagliatelle in a watery oxtail tomato sauce was intriguing initially but ultimately a snooze.

Flamm implored me to try that dish again because it's one of the restaurant's signatures, the only representative of Rome's *quinto quarto* cooking. The 'fifth quarter' is offal and lesser cuts of meat, which Romans have turned into a variety of iconic dishes. Perhaps a couple more of these might help Il Carciofo separate itself from all those other places with $24 carbonara.

So unless you're a Flamm superfan, give Il Carciofo time for the crowds to abate. Then go, order something you know you like, and wait for that moment, that bite, that makes you stop to take notice and ask yourself: Is this the best version I've ever had? Yes it is.

IL CARCIOFO
★½
1045 W. Fulton Market, West Loop
■ **Dinner for two** $200
■ **Tip** Share a big bowl of creamy gelato or sorbetto for dessert. The pistachio and cherry are especially great.

★ Recommended
★★ Very good ★★★ Excellent
★★★★ Exceptional

NEIGHBORHOOD FIND

New Mexican

TAQUIZAS VALDEZ
3038 W. Irving Park Rd.,
Albany Park
■ **Perfect order** Pambazo de hongos ($19), wings ($13)

■ Chicago's Mexican sandwich scene is strong, but Taquizas Valdez, which chef-owner Ivan Valdez opened in December, is raising the bar. Take the pambazo de hongos, which consists of bread dipped in chile sauce, toasted, then stuffed with sautéed mushrooms, refried black beans, crispy fries, lettuce, tomato, onion, avocado, lime crema, queso fresco, and salsa macha. It's a beast that could feed two. And dare I say it's the best Mexican sandwich in the city right now?

Taquizas Valdez also offers tacos and wings for lunch and dinner, and chilaquiles and a Nutella and cream cheese Danish for breakfast. It's a menu that combines homey fare with refined techniques and speaks to Valdez's background: He learned to cook by following his mother around the family kitchen and worked professionally at restaurants like Quiote.

Besides the pambazo, try the crispy wings, which come dressed with Valdez's mother's mole or lemon-pepper dry rub—I love the piquant flavor of the latter. His tacos, too, push beyond the standard lineup you see everywhere: El Americano comes with marinated skirt steak, melted Muenster, lettuce, tomato, and a bright lime crema on a toasted flour tortilla. It's the kind of bite that inspires a return visit to see how Valdez keeps innovating. –TITUS RUSCITTI

Pambazo de hongos

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MIRRA'S ROTI QUESADILLA

Makes 4 quesadillas
Time 1 hour 30 minutes

½	cup canola oil
2	medium Spanish onions, quartered
2	Tbsp. plus 2 tsp. minced garlic, divided
2	Tbsp. plus 2 tsp. minced ginger, divided
¼	cup seeded and minced serrano chiles
4	tomatoes, cored and crushed
½	cup Chettinad masala seasoning (like India's BBQ brand, available on Amazon)
½	cup coconut milk
6	Tbsp. unsalted butter, cubed and divided
2	tsp. kosher salt, plus more for seasoning
1½	cups torn mushrooms, like oyster or maitake
4	frozen rotis (like Kawan brand paratha, available at Metro Spice Mart)
5	Amul cheese slices, torn (available at Metro Spice Mart)
1	cup Oaxaca cheese, torn
¼	cup crispy fried shallots
1	small bunch cilantro, roughly chopped

1

Make the masala: Heat oil in a large sauté pan over medium. Add onions, 2 tablespoons garlic, 2 tablespoons ginger, and serranos and cook, stirring often, until golden brown, about 25 minutes. Add tomatoes, seasoning, and 2 cups water and continue cooking and stirring until most of the liquid has evaporated and the mixture is thick, about 15 minutes. Stir in coconut milk, 4 tablespoons butter, and 2 teaspoons salt and then transfer to a blender, pulsing to emulsify the mixture. Set aside.

2

Sauté the mushrooms: While the masala cooks, heat a large skillet over medium. Add mushrooms and remaining butter, garlic, and ginger. Cook, stirring occasionally, until mushrooms are golden brown, about 10 minutes. Season with salt to taste and set aside.

3

Make the quesadillas: Wipe out the skillet. Heat rotis according to package instructions and set aside. Return one roti to the skillet and top with one-quarter of each of the cheeses and reserved mushrooms. Fold in half and cook, turning halfway, until cheese melts. Repeat with remaining rotis. To serve, set quesadillas on plates and top with masala, fried shallots, and cilantro.

Photograph by JEFF MARINI

The Door County Contemporary art fair will be held at the Peninsula School of Art in Fish Creek, Wisconsin from June 5th to June 8th, 2025. The fair will bring contemporary art to an area with an enthusiasm that embraces the energy, tradition, and welcoming spirit of the region.

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The Hot List

10 places everyone's talking about (in order of heat)

DJ's Great Room

Sophia Steak

1 **CHARIS LISTENING BAR** **What** A music-focused cocktail bar with a beverage director nabbed from New Orleans's celebrated Cure **Why** Sip Malört Palomas while taking in the vibe. **Where** *3317 S. Morgan St., Bridgeport*

2 **HOLY BAGELS** **What** The bagel boom won't stop. **Why** For a fiery start, try a jalapeño one with a jalapeño schmear. **Where** *2566 N. Clark St., Lincoln Park*

3 **SANCTUARY** **What** Rohini Dey closed longtime Indian restaurant Vermilion to make room for this new bar. **Why** Head in for global snacks like lomo saltado and and drinks like mango mojitos. **Where** *10 W. Hubbard St., River North*

4 **SHARPIES** **What** Detroit-style pizza and wings from the team behind Ada Street **Why** Located by the Salt Shed, it's a quick go-to for a pie topped with Italian beef and giardiniera. **Where** *1721 N. Elston Ave., West Town*

5 **DJ'S GREAT ROOM and LAYLA & RINGO'S** **What** David Morton debuts two newbies. **Why** DJ's offers all-day fare (we see you, Greek half chicken), while Layla & Ringo's is a café-market. **Where** *908 and 920 N. Wells St., Near North Side*

6 **SPOKO** **What** Polish street food is the focus at this fast-casual spot from the prolific team behind Wurst Behavior and Pierogi Kitchen. **Why** With shrimp po' boy zapi, this is Polish fare, redefined. **Where** *723 W. Armitage Ave., Lincoln Park*

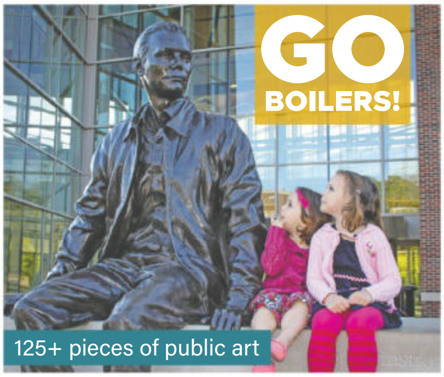
7 **TEN SECONDS YUNNAN RICE NOODLES** **What** Soups star at this Yunnan newcomer. **Why** Tomato soup with brisket and noodles sounds like just the way to refuel while exploring Chinatown. **Where** *2105 S. Jefferson St., East Pilsen*

8 **LEM'S BAR-B-Q** **What** The beloved joint is now a James Beard America's Classic. **Why** The lengthy 'cue queue says it all. **Where** *311 E. 75th St., Chatham*

9 **BAR SÓTANO** **What** Rick Bayless hosts a monthly taco series that honors alumni of his kitchens. **Why** May's event features Stephen Sandoval (Diego), while June is Jaime Sotelo (Chile Toreado). **Where** *443 N. Clark St., River North*

10 **SOPHIA STEAK** **What** The third location of the North Shore steakhouse debuts, this one within city limits. **Why** We'll catch you at the bar for a burger loaded with horseradish aïoli. **Where** *748 N. State St., River North*

PHOTOGRAPHY: (DJ'S GREAT ROOM) REGAN BARONI; (SOPHIA STEAK) KINSHIP COMPANY



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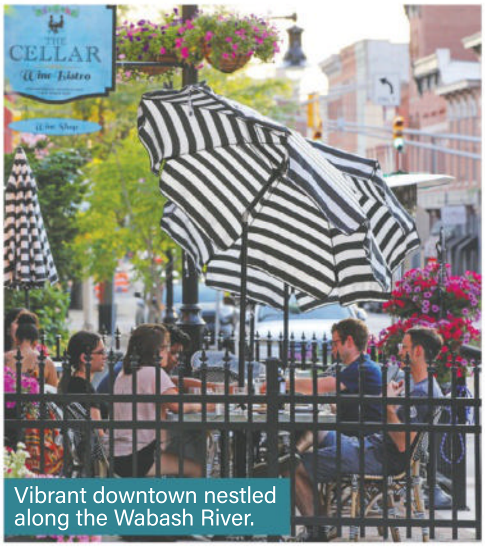

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Love and the Literati

How a couple's passion for books spurred not only a romance but a business embraced by local authors. By REBECCA MAKKAI

THE LITERARY EVENT OF LAST FALL IN CHICAGO WAS not a reading or a book signing or an awards ceremony but the wedding of two beloved booksellers. In attendance: a slew of notable authors, the editors of independent presses, publicists, other bookstore owners. Literary thriller writer Gillian Flynn performed the ceremony. "If an apocalypse happened out there," someone said to me that night, "we could reconstruct the entire American literary world just from this party."

When the venue, the Exchange on Michigan Avenue, closed for the night, much of the group trooped a block south to the second floor of the Fine Arts Building and karaoked till dawn at Exile in Bookville, owned by the newlyweds, Javier Ramirez and Kristin Gilbert Ramirez. Maybe you've only walked past and noticed the folded sign on the sidewalk advertising the shop or one of its author events. Maybe you've gone in and lost hours in the three small rooms, poring over the carefully curated selection or gawking out the window at the views of Grant Park and Buckingham Fountain. If you did, you probably left with five books you hadn't known you desperately wanted and with two new friends in the owners. As Florida-based author Nathan Hill puts it, "A typical night out with Javier and Kristin involves unexpectedly running into someone they know – a waiter, busboy, bartender, a random bookstore customer – who will inevitably send over a round of drinks or snacks because Javier and Kristin seem to be friends with freaking everyone."

Their paths to bookselling, and to each other, are worthy of a twisty novel with a well-earned meet-cute and a happy ending. Shortly after high school, Javier, who grew up in Sacramento, California, began working at a Tower Records there, selling videos. This was 1988 ("The year I was born!" Kristin pipes in as Javier tells the story). Five years later, he was moved to the books section. He'd been what he calls a "surface reader" prior to that, and learned about books on the job. Two years later, Tower was opening a store in Schaumburg and asked him to come out to help start its books department.

He stayed in the Chicago area to work at Crown Books for "a long, hard year," then found himself at his first indie: the Sears Tower branch of Barbara's Bookstore. This was a world where booksellers could get to know customers, where people wanted recommendations, where employees could influence which books were stocked. When he left Barbara's, it was for another indie, then another. One of these, the Book Stall in Winnetka, is where I met him in 2012. I left with an armful of novels he'd suggested and an invitation to join Publishing Cocktails, a social gathering he hosts with writer Keir Graff. Javier is a natural networker and connector within the national bookseller scene, which might have something to do with how he's ended up judging the National Book Award for fiction and the Carnegie Medal for both fiction and nonfiction.

The more I got to know Javier, the more I was convinced he needed his own bookstore. I daydreamed as much with other

Exile in Bookville owners Javier Ramirez and Kristin Gilbert Ramirez

Photograph by JACLYN RIVAS

writers. He had so much accumulated goodwill among Chicago authors, we figured, that it would have to succeed. He'd helped many of our careers immeasurably. He'd pushed our first novels when few people had discovered them. He'd hauled books across town off the clock so we could sign them. A few years ago, that dream briefly came true when Ramirez and a partner opened Madison Street Books in the West Loop. The opening party was on March 14, 2020. "We were basically open one day," he says, and then the store had to switch to online orders.

Enter Kristin Gilbert. Raised in Reno, Nevada, she came to Illinois for college and stayed for two master's and a PhD – the latter in criminology and law, focusing on language and gestures in legal settings. She lived just blocks from Madison Street Books, and even before the store officially opened, she called to ask if they carried the novel *My Dark Vanessa*. Javier answered, and informed her they didn't. She told him it was OK, that she'd get it from another local indie. "And then I thought about it for a minute," she says, "and that's such an asshole move." She called back, apologized, and asked him to order it. When she dropped by a few days later to pick it up, he invited her to that opening party.

They got to messaging about books, including *Let the Right One In*— a prophetic title for their budding friendship.

The event was on her birthday, and she had no intention of going. But then her mother canceled her trip to town, so Kristin went, solo. When Javier emailed the next day to thank her for coming, she mentioned that her mom always got her a signed first edition for her birthday. They got to messaging about books, including the Swedish vampire novel *Let the Right One In* – a prophetic title for their budding friendship.

Things weren't working out in Kristin's relationship or between Javier and his business partner. Before the end of that summer, Javier and Kristin had each severed ties with the past and had launched two endeavors together: an online iteration of Exile in Bookville and a romance. About that name: Many will recognize the homage to Liz Phair's 1993 debut album, *Exile in Guyville,* the couple's nod to the idea that their store would always include a selection of music. (Phair, a Chicago-area native, has yet to visit the shop but often likes its posts on social media.)

For a little under a year, the enterprise existed only virtually – hosting well-attended author events on Zoom, quietly growing its reputation – while the couple searched for a physical location. Javier was visiting the Dial, a bookstore on the second floor of the Fine Arts Building, when someone behind the desk asked, "Are you Javier? Do you happen to be looking for a bookstore?" The Dial was closing, and the space could be his if he and Kristin bought every single thing inside, from the printer and plants to an inventory of new and used books that wasn't what they would have chosen. There were a lot of reasons not to do it: Kristin was teaching full-time at Elmhurst University. They'd have to use so much of their savings on the required upfront rent that they'd have little money to buy new books. And it was April 2021 – the Loop was practically deserted. "We thought about it for a second," Javier says. And then they took the plunge.

There was no grand opening this time, no publicity, no GoFundMe, no employees, just heaps of accrued trust and friendship from nearly every author in Chicago and a lot of book buyers. And it worked. "I'm a pessimist," Javier says, "so I was surprised in the first two years what we were doing in sales."

Exile's first in-person event (outdoors, in the building's rooftop garden) was that July, for T.J. Newman's debut novel, *Falling*. Between the new store owners and the new author, there was, Newman recalls, "this alchemy of nerves and excitement that made it feel like big, difficult dreams – writing books and selling books – were possible." Newman has returned for both of her subsequent books. Three titles into a career of bestsellers, the Phoenix-based author still insists that her publisher send her to Chicago to launch each one at Exile.

The couple take advantage of a variety of spaces in the Fine Arts Building, including the Studebaker Theater, for events. Percival Everett has made a visit. So has Jonathan Franzen, who arrived early for his reading and sat in the back office for six hours, writing. Ling Ma offered to run the store while the couple were on their honeymoon. (They were grateful, but declined.) Flynn, who has an office in the building, stops in at the end of just about every workday. "When I first moved to Chicago 15 years ago, it was Javier who introduced me to the literary scene," she says.

Customers are often taken aback by all the signed copies on the shelves. ("How do you know so many authors?") They also ask where the eclectic selection – books in translation, small-press printings, unusual finds – comes from. The answer, Javier says, is that when you finally have your own store, you "just do all the weird shit you always wanted to do when you worked for someone."

Everyone at the wedding had their own story: the time the launch party went till 1 a.m., the time the store sold more copies of some small-press novella than any store in the country, the time Exile shared 20 extra copies of hot commodity *Crying in H Mart* with a rival indie.

As soon as the couple asked her to officiate, Flynn knew exactly how she'd start: with Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "Book Power." It begins: "Books are meat and medicine and flame and flight and flower." "It felt perfect," Flynn says, "for two people who live and breathe books."

Dr. Stacie J. Stephenson

Gateway for Cancer Research

Dr. Stacie Stephenson is America's leading lifestyle medicine doctor and a prominent figure in the world of philanthropy and healthcare. She is a pioneer of functional and integrative medicine who has dedicated her life's work to helping people create vibrant health from within, prevent chronic disease, and increase health.

Her latest bestselling book, Glow: 90 Days to Create Your Vibrant Life from Within, helps readers transform their health with morning and evening meditations grounded in her holistic approach to physical and mental wellness that centers around a VIBRANT lifestyle. In her first bestselling book, Vibrant: A Groundbreaking Program to Get Energized, Own Your Health, and Glow, she helps readers through a program for establishing small daily habits that prioritize health for a more vibrant and energetic life.

In her role as the Vice Chairman of Gateway for Cancer Research, Dr. Stephenson is deeply committed to fundraising for early-stage cancer trials and supporting innovative cancer research. She is at the forefront of Gateway for Cancer Research's premier Chicago philanthropic event, the Cures Gala, which will be hosted on October 18, 2025. It will be an amazing evening of finding, funding and furthering vital cancer research designed to provide better, safer treatment options, giving patients more time, improved quality of life and the healing power of HOPE!

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DOORS

With ridership lagging
and a fiscal reckoning looming,
the L is in trouble.

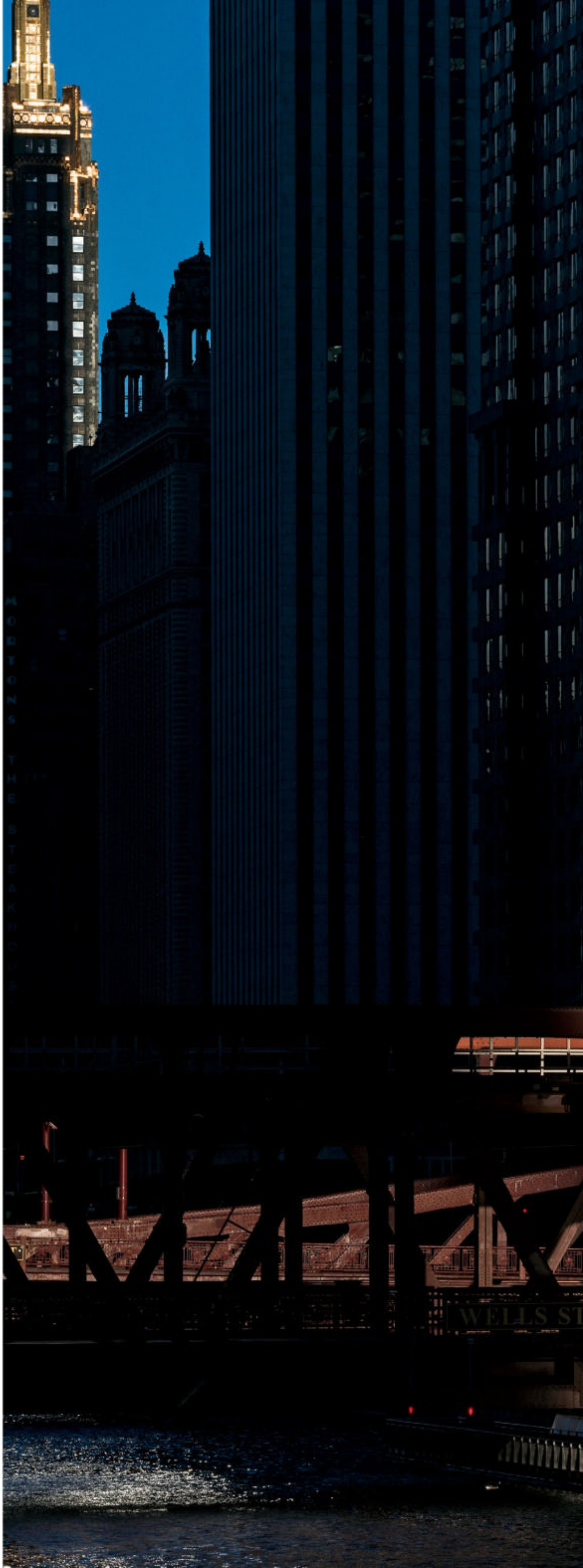
CLOSING

Here's why our train
is worth saving.

BY TAL ROSENBERG

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLARISSA BONET

PORTRAITS BY ALEX GARCIA



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Graham Garfield gazes pridefully from the northernmost perch of the Belmont L station in Lake View. Officially, Garfield is the general manager of RPM operations and communication coordination at the Chicago Transit Authority, a position he's held for almost six years.

RPM stands for Red and Purple Modernization, a multistage effort to upgrade the Red and Purple Line tracks, whose oldest section dates back 125 years. But the project, the first phase of which is estimated to cost $2.1 billion, was only part of why I was so keen on speaking with Garfield. He is also indisputably the L's biggest superfan. As a freshman at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in 1997, while his classmates were drinking beer and listening to Radiohead's *OK Computer*, the Evanston native built the website Chicago-L.org. Even though it undeniably looks like it was made in 1997, it is somehow still the internet's most valuable resource for information on just about everything having to do with the city's train system – a vast repository of history, maps, fares, news articles, logos, ephemera, and even short fiction.

Garfield interned with the CTA in college and has worked there ever since, including while obtaining a master's in urban planning and policy from the University of Illinois Chicago. He has more or less devoted his entire adult life to the L, and you could reasonably argue he is the foremost expert on it. That said, at various points in our conversation Garfield, with audible anxiety, goes out of his way to say he doesn't speak for the CTA. Bald and bespectacled, with a salt-and-pepper beard, he's wearing all-black workwear and heavy work boots. But this gruff outfit couldn't be further from his personality, which is textbook Midwest nice. In a high-pitched, nasal voice, he says things like "It's really neat!"

I met Garfield at the Howard station to ride south along the RPM's first phase, which stretches from Bryn Mawr to Belmont. We got off at Belmont and walked to the edge of the platform. It's from here where he now peers over a short yellow fence at massive, snaking concrete railways and points ahead. About 100 feet in front of him, galumphing around the tracks, are eight construction workers in neon yellow vests and white hardhats. If you ride the L, you see these people a lot, emerging from the shadows of a tunnel or precariously sidestepping along an elevated railway. Garfield explains that the CTA can't modernize the Red and Purple Lines all at once, because trains still need to run during construction, so it's done piecemeal. If you've been to the Belmont station in recent years, you've witnessed this work, enormous gray pillars gradually growing out of the ground as you look north.

On this Wednesday afternoon in late January, as the project nears completion, Garfield describes various tracks that are about to reopen the following Monday. "It's kind of a big weekend," he says. "After five years, all the things we've been working toward are slowly, one by one, coming online."

My trip with Garfield from Howard to Belmont was pleasant. He spoke at length and with a half smile about L lines that never came to be, like a West Loop subway, and mused about misconceptions of rail transportation. "It's an oversimplification to suggest that the L is still a 19th-century technology," he said. "It is no more so than airplanes are still a Wright brothers technology." He also likened his job to an act of service: “I was raised in a household that believed in doing your part.”

But my journey to meet him was much less enjoyable. Though the CTA’s tracker had said my bus would show up in 10 minutes, I ended up waiting in the cold for half an hour. At the Wilson L station, the CTA display had the next northbound train arriving in eight minutes; it was five minutes late. When I finally boarded, someone was openly smoking weed in the car, which smelled like urine and stale cigarettes.

These kinds of trips used to be outliers, but they’re becoming remarkably common. Commuters complain about “ghost trains,” which appear on the tracker but never arrive. There’s also been a sharp increase in slow zones, where trains move at a crawl because of deteriorating tracks. As a result, those that do arrive are often late: Last year, the CTA recorded 2,775 delays of 10 minutes or more. And according to an analysis by the grassroots transit advocacy group Commuters Take Action, only 52% of trains arrived at their stations on time. (“On time” here means the train showed up within a 25 percent window, based on the scheduled interval between trains, on either side of its slated arrival.)

But while waiting for the L is irritating, riding it can be even worse. Social media accounts like CTA Fails document seats covered in trash and food and floors littered with cigarette butts. Many riders feel unsafe these days, and for good reason: Last September, WBEZ reported that the violent crime rate on CTA trains and buses had tripled since 2015. And while incidents such as the killing of four passengers on a Blue Line train last year get the most attention, plenty of riders also have been scared away by pervasive antisocial behavior on the trains, such as smoking. On my most active text thread, a friend recently wrote: “I’m on the redline and everyone is nodding off or in some kind of fent stance. Very dark!!”

Of all the people I interviewed for this story – including CTA officials, politicians, and transit experts and advocates – roughly half admitted they no longer ride the L. Jacky Grimshaw, a senior director at the nonprofit Center for Neighborhood Technology, told me she opts for the Metra and bus over the Green Line to get to the Loop these days, mostly because of convenience but also out of safety concerns. “I was getting nothing but horror stories,” she says. Outside my own home office window, I can see Brown Line trains rumbling along the ground-level tracks; at night, the entire eight-car convoy is often empty.

PHOTOGRAPH: ALEX GARCIA

“It’s an oversimplification to suggest that the L is still a 19th-century technology,” says the CTA’s Graham Garfield. “It is no more so than airplanes are still a Wright brothers technology.”

At the peak in 2015, nearly 768,000 people boarded the L on an average weekday, according to the CTA. Last year, that number was just 389,000 – a drop of almost 50 percent in less than a decade. Whereas the L was once a societal leveler, the means by which Chicagoans of all types went to their job or school or party, frustration with its unreliable service and fears about safety are leading those who can to abandon it.

The L’s struggles come at a moment of fiscal reckoning. After ridership took a nosedive during the pandemic, the region’s mass transit agencies – the CTA, Metra, and Pace, all under the oversight of the Regional Transportation Authority – received a combined $3.5 billion in federal funding to maintain their systems until people returned to trains and buses in full force again. (The CTA’s $2.16 billion 2025 budget includes $579 million in federal relief funds.) By the end of this year, the CTA will have only $48 million remaining of the $2.2 billion it received, far less than the projected 2026 budget deficit of $605 million. The “fiscal cliff,” as it's ominously known, facing regional transit as a whole has been cited as $770 million, but state Representative Kam Buckner, one of the leading legislators working on a solution, believes the actual budget gap legislators need to fill if they truly want to fix the system is much higher: "That number is a grave miscalculation. By the time everything gets sorted out, it's between $1 billion and $1.5 billion."

If the city and state do not find a fix, we'll be on the path to transit dystopia. The CTA, along with Metra and Pace, will have to cut staffing. It may also mean a reduction of routes across the region and the end of 24/7 service for the CTA's bus and rail networks. If you think wait times on the L are bad now, they will get way worse: The RTA has said trains could run 10 to 25 percent less frequently and that more than 50 stations could be closed or see significantly reduced service. This would push even more riders away, which spells a downward spiral for the L.

That would be a tragedy. There is no Chicago without the L. It's part of the fabric of our civic identity. Here, you don't say "downtown." You say "the Loop," because the buildings that form our skyline couldn't have grown so tall without the circle of elevated railways beneath them. A great city doesn't just deserve a great transit system – it *needs* one. But getting the L back to being a source of pride will mean tapping into the same ingenuity that made it a triumph of civic engineering in the first place.

It's the last day of January and of Dorval Carter's tenure as president of the CTA, and a group of about two dozen people are celebrating at Emporium Arcade Bar in Logan Square. On top of wooden tables lie farewell cards, snacks, and a cake with "Dynamic & Optimized Retirement" in red frosting – a nod to the kind of

Elevator
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Cottage Grove 2 min
Ashland/63rd 21 min
Harlem/Lake 18 min
Harlem/Lake 22 min
Lunch Without Lifting a Finger
FACTOR
Cermak-McCormick Place
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Elevator

oblique jargon that Carter liked to use. A yellow piece of construction paper reads “Happy Retirement Dorval,” with notes written all around. “Doors open on the right at unemployment!” one says.

This isn’t Carter’s official retirement party – it’s way too low budget for a guy with an annual salary of $391,000. Rather, this is a celebration hosted by Commuters Take Action, which formed in 2022 to pressure the CTA to perform better. It has put much of the blame for the L’s woes on Carter and relentlessly called for him to be replaced.

I spot Fabio Göttlicher, a software engineer who’s one of the group’s founders. Tall and mustachioed, he is wearing a Southwestern-print hoodie and a yellow paper birthday hat. In late 2021, as concerns mounted about inconsistent service, unsanitary trains, and public safety, he wrote a program to assess the L’s performance and found that only 55 to 60 percent of scheduled trains were running – an astonishing drop in service, even accounting for the decline in demand during the pandemic. That discovery spurred him to become more of a transit activist.

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It was just a few years earlier that Chicagoans could actually boast about the L. In 2017, then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel gushed about the city’s transit system in a *New York Times* op-ed headlined “In Chicago, the Trains Actually Run on Time.” He cited a survey that found that 85 percent of Chicagoans were satisfied with local public transportation. While other cities were preoccupied with costly projects to expand their systems, Emanuel wrote, the CTA was focused on modernizing its existing capabilities to ensure reliability.

Carter was appointed by Emanuel in 2015 in large part because of his ability to secure funding for expensive infrastructure projects. Having worked for the Federal Transit Administration and briefly as the U.S. Department of Transportation chief of staff, Carter had the savvy to navigate the Beltway and drum up money, including the $3 billion in federal funding he secured for the RPM and for the extension of the Red Line south to 130th Street.

But for all of Carter’s success in securing precious federal dollars, there’s little doubt that the system decayed under his watch. The thrust of the criticism heaped on Carter is that he prioritized those pricey, splashy projects over day-to-day maintenance. The pandemic, of course, dealt the CTA a blow no one could have seen coming. Yet transit advocates believe issues arising from it – staffing shortages (before the pandemic, there were 880 rail operators; as of February, there were 825, up from 723 a year prior), crime spikes, and higher rates of homelessness on the L – could have been better addressed. Which is how Carter, who infamously rarely took public transportation, went from a relatively anonymous agency head to a frequent subject of critical news stories and social media attacks.

Even before the pandemic, some of Carter’s decisions were hard to explain. In 2019, Cook County initiated a pilot program to provide money to all three local transit agencies to alleviate burdens on Far South Side and south suburban commuters. Metra accepted a proposal to reduce fares in those areas; Pace amped up service on its 352 Halsted route, which is heavily used by suburbanites. But according to Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle, the CTA snubbed the county’s offer. At the time, Carter was doing the delicate dance of trying to lock down the remaining federal money, around $1.1 billion, for the Red Line extension, and when it came to helping the far southern part of the city, the agency wanted to focus its energy on that project. The CTA also feared, as then-Mayor Lori Lightfoot publicly stated, that if the county increased ridership on Metra and Pace on the Far South Side and in the south suburbs, it would take commuters away from the CTA, decreasing its fare revenue.

Still, Preckwinkle is mystified at the logic of turning down immediate relief because of a solution a decade away. “I never got to talk to Dorval,” she tells me. “Who knows what motivated them. They wouldn’t work with us, that’s the short story. And we had money! When people are prepared to give you money and you won’t talk to them, that’s a little odd.”

With the decline of the L under Carter came a surge of activism. As people like Göttlicher began to use data to document the train system’s unreliability, they formed Commuters Take Action to organize their efforts. In September 2022, members demonstrated outside CTA headquarters before a Chicago Transit Board meeting, the first of several protests they've staged. They've written op-eds in local publications, been quoted in *The New York Times*, and relentlessly posted daily reports on their social media accounts of how many L trains run on schedule. Members are getting involved in other ways, too: Morgan Madderom, Göttlicher's fiancée, is director of transportation policy and planning on the City Council's Committee on Pedestrian and Traffic Safety, while Caroline Pavlecic sits on the CTA's Citizens Advisory Board.

Despite the festive atmosphere at Emporium, Göttlicher remains apprehensive about the future of the L. He argues that Mayor Brandon Johnson's appointment of Michael Eaddy, a pastor with no prior experience in public transit, to the CTA board isn't reflective of a person with a serious commitment to public transit. "Considering that the mayor defended Carter for so long and was on Carter's side, I hope we don't end up with another Carter-like person at the helm," Göttlicher says.

Earlier in January, the CTA appointed Nora Leerhsen, the agency's chief of staff, as interim president. Leerhsen has pledged to address smoking on the L trains and the cleanliness of them. As for Carter's permanent replacement, whether it's Leerhsen or someone else, Pavlecic is hoping for a leader who is more involved – who actually rides the trains and buses, who talks with frontline workers to understand their experiences, and who interacts with the public to hear their concerns and suggestions. "I would like to believe that CTA is going to look for somebody who embodies those qualities," she says.

For all the ire directed at Carter, the issues facing the L are much larger than any one person. "The biggest problem is just lack of willpower to change anything," Pavlecic says. "We famously had Lori Lightfoot say that Chicago is a car city while she was in office a couple of years ago. And that's just ridiculous because so many Chicagoans, especially in more densely populated neighborhoods, get around primarily by walking or biking or taking transit."

Dani and Emily, two women in their 20s, are wearing costumes for the occasion. Dani is dressed in khaki coveralls with a CTA logo pasted onto her arm and has a mock jet pack and raygun – a "ghost BUSter," like a Peter Venkman tasked with eliminating delinquent buses. Emily sports a slapdash pageant queen outfit, with a tiara and a sash reading "Miss the Bus."

Dani and Emily both follow Commuters Take Action on Instagram, which is how they heard about the party. They explain that their frustration with the CTA primarily has to do with infrequent service, especially as a safety issue. Emily tells me that she waited an hour and a half for a train on New Year's Eve and regularly experiences 25-to-30-minute lags if she just misses the L or a bus. Neither of them has a car, so the CTA is critical to their ability to traverse the city.

We're interrupted by Pavlecic, who tells us it's time to cut the cake. Everyone gathers around, amid the hubbub of the growing crowd at Emporium, and Pavlecic is momentarily at a loss for words. As we all raise glasses of craft beer, she shouts, "To Dorval Carter's retirement!" No one really seems sure what to say. After all, no one really knows what's next.

During City Council hearings, Carter argued that the central issue facing the CTA was a lack of funding. This is a complaint the agency has lodged for decades. It dates back to 1973, when the Illinois legislature established the Regional Transportation Authority to address the financial troubles of the CTA and various declining suburban rail systems. But their huge deficits proved too much of a problem for the RTA to address, so in 1983 the state restructured things: It stripped the RTA of some powers – including setting fares and overseeing operations – and created two new agencies in the suburbs, one for buses (Pace) and one for rail (Metra).

The state legislature devised a formula to funnel funding to the (now four) agencies, money that the RTA would distribute. How funds are disbursed gets a little complicated, but it ends up being disproportionate to the realities of local transportation. Last year, the CTA accounted for 84 percent of all trips in the region but received only 46 percent of state funding, whereas Pace accounted for only 5 percent but received 21 percent. The upshot: The CTA is one of the most poorly financed transit organizations in the country, ranking second to last among comparable agencies in funding per trip in 2022.

When I met with Preckwinkle, she came prepared with more figures to illustrate local transit's underfunding. The state contributes 17 percent of northeastern Illinois's public transit budget. For comparison: New York City gets 28 percent from its state; the Boston metro area, 44 percent; and Philadelphia, 50 percent.

What does this all mean for riders? Look no further than how two previous financial crises affected the CTA. In 1997, with a drastic reduction in federal funding, the agency had difficulty meeting its operating costs; a private consulting firm, Booz-Allen & Hamilton, was brought in and proposed a slew of cuts to the city's bus service. Then in 2008, the Great Recession's effect on the state budget led to fare hikes and layoffs of more than 2,400 workers.

Pennie McCoach, the president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 308, which represents the rail employees, told me these cuts have had a lasting impact. Before the Booz-Allen staff reductions, L trains had "motormen" driving, plus conductors in other cars, which meant there were always people in the middle and back of the train monitoring passengers. But now, she points out, a driver is often the only CTA employee on a train. "If there's an incident, sometimes that one person has to come all the way from their head car, where they're operating, walk back to the seventh car, see what the incident is, deal with it, communicate to the control center, and see if you're going to get some type of help or assistance." To do this, of course, the driver has to stop the train, which exacerbates delays.

State Representative Kam Buckner is proposing big changes to the CTA, Metra, and Pace. "They put up a nice united front to make it seem like they're all on the same page, but anybody who spends any time on the system will tell you that we know they're not."

Even acknowledging that the CTA is underfunded, it's fair to wonder whether the agency could be doing more with the resources it has. Stephen Schlickman, the head of the RTA from 2005 to 2010, recalls that in 2007 his agency faced a $400 million shortfall, so he requested that the Illinois auditor general conduct a review to ensure that the problem wasn't mismanagement. He questions why the CTA doesn't undertake a similar probe. (The CTA says it conducts its own audit annually and is subject to triennial audits from both the Federal Transit Administration and Illinois Department of Transportation.) And he can't make sense of how the CTA spent its COVID relief money: "I'm sorry, they got billions of dollars from the federal government, and why the service, crime, filthiness of the CTA became so bad is beyond me."

The short answer is that the money was used to keep trains and buses running even as fare revenue dropped sharply. (The CTA releases an annual budget report with broad categories of costs and spending but doesn't provide a line-by-line breakdown.) In 2020, coinciding with the height of the pandemic, the L saw a 65 percent decrease in ridership. But the CTA didn't cut service, at least not proportionally to the decline in ridership, because essential workers needed public transportation. And the agency didn't lay off a single rail operator.

Yet despite the agency's efforts to maintain its frontline personnel, staffing has been an issue. Kyle Lucas, the executive director of the advocacy group Better Streets Chicago (he was also at Carter's retirement party), tells me that hiring challenges are as much the CTA's doing as the pandemic's. The requirements to become a rail operator here are far stricter than in other cities. Before you can even train for that role, you have to work as a flagger – someone who directs and signals trains on the tracks – often for several months. (The CTA says there is no minimum time requirement that someone must be a flagger before they can move to rail operator training, and that this prerequisite "allows us to maintain the highest safety standards for both riders and employees.")

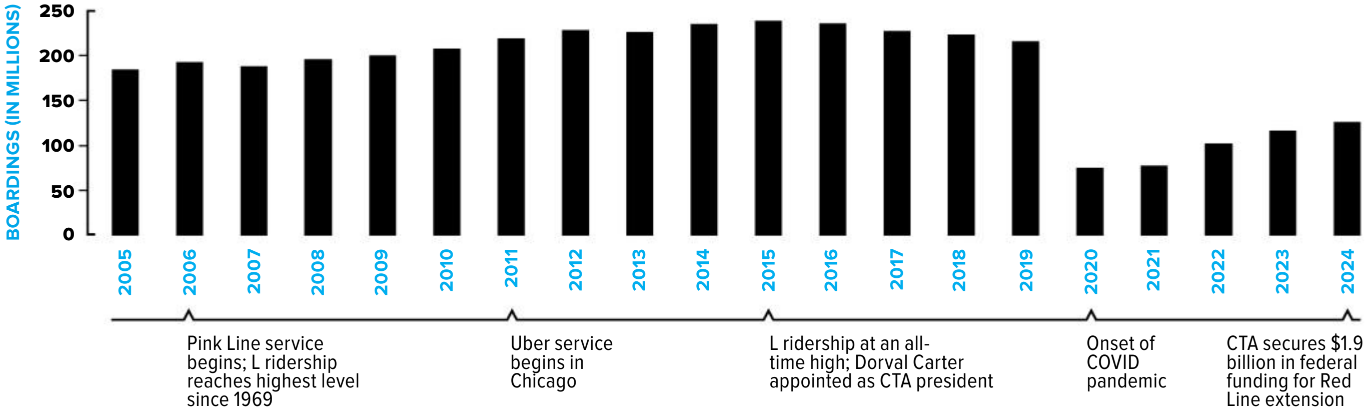
That job, which puts you at risk of electrocution or a fall, pays barely over $23 an hour. "It's horrible expectations," Lucas says of this prerequisite. "And they've just been really resistant to actually revisiting that, when other agencies and systems have even before this crisis." Understaffing also means that drivers must put in more overtime, working shifts as long as 13 hours, which contributes to burnout and resignations.

Just as with riders, safety is a chief concern of train operators these days. McCoach says there aren't enough Chicago Police Department officers working the CTA – fewer than 100 are assigned to the whole system, she said at a recent state senate hearing. One operator, who asked to remain anonymous, told me that since the start of the pandemic, the level of harassment and violence toward frontline CTA employees has escalated. The agency hired more unarmed private security guards in 2022 to supplement CPD efforts, but the operator says those guards have little impact, spending much of their time standing around, looking at their phones. The operator described a recent meeting between CTA employees and an official from the security force. The operator

PHOTOGRAPH: (BUCKNER) ALEX GARCIA

OFF THE RAILS

L RIDERSHIP, WHICH HIT ITS PEAK IN THE MID-2010S, HAD BEGUN TO SLIP EVEN BEFORE COVID TORPEDOED IT. FIVE YEARS ON, THE NUMBERS ARE STILL WELL BELOW PREPANDEMIC LEVELS.



asked why the guards don't have handcuffs or hold people in custody until CPD officers arrive. The executive responded, "You don't want one of our guards to get jumped, do you?"

During Dennis Mondero's first week as the CTA's deputy chief of staff, in 2009, he toured the agency's West Loop control center, a wide room with one wall covered nearly floor to ceiling with surveillance screens. It looked like a scene in a Michael Bay movie, a giant eye keeping watch over all of the L stations. But Mondero's attention was drawn to something else: an adjacent wall with a grid of blinking red lights resembling the L system map. What he saw nagged at him. "The No. 1 compliment that the CTA got when I first arrived was, 'Hey, you guys finally have a bus tracker [for riders]. Great job, CTA,'" he says. "And the No. 1 criticism was, 'You knuckleheads, how come you don't have something for the trains?'"

The agency's explanation: Buses were already equipped with GPS, and outfitting the trains, most of which were built in the 1980s, would be too expensive. Yet this grid on the wall was somehow tracking trains. "It's so accurate that the supervisors are talking to the operators," Mondero remembers. "And I'm like, 'How the heck do we know where the cars are if we don't have GPS?' And they're like, 'Because of the electric circuit, we have an approximation.'" The readings weren't precise, but they were reasonably accurate. Mondero knew the technology could serve as the basis for a tool that could track trains for riders. He just had to sell the idea to the CTA. He called the arrival times "estimated" and the system "a beta product." With around $100,000, his idea led to the tracker the CTA still uses today on its platforms and apps.

The point of this anecdote, explains Mondero, who left the agency in 2013 and is now on the RTA's board, is that the CTA has to constantly find solutions to its problems on the cheap. This is primarily the purview of Molly Poppe, the CTA's first chief innovation officer, who started at the agency in 2019. Her department is tasked with figuring out how technology can address the challenges facing public transit. Two days before Poppe and I spoke in mid-February, the CTA's board approved a pilot program to install cameras at two L stations to detect objects or people on the tracks. Such obstructions result in service delays, and the CTA gets 2,000 reports of them annually.

Poppe was also behind the visionary proposal that Dorval Carter talked about in a speech he delivered to the City Club of Chicago in September: a map showing how the agency would broaden L service with more investment. I'd seen something like it before. In 2014, the Center for Neighborhood Technology and another local nonprofit, the Active Transportation Alliance, launched a campaign called Transit Future, offering a proposal for what expanded rail service in Chicago might look like. Unveiled at a press conference with bigwigs like Rahm Emanuel and Toni Preckwinkle, the map was tantalizing. Just imagine: the Brown Line connecting to the Blue Line at Jefferson Park, easing North Side residents' commutes to O'Hare; a brand-new Lime Line, running along Cicero Avenue, to bridge the 95th/Dan Ryan and Jefferson Park stations and make public transportation much more accessible to West Siders; and a high-speed connection between Midway and O'Hare.

Jacky Grimshaw of the Center for Neighborhood Technology conceived

cta
ROOSEVELT

Transit Future. She explains that nothing in the map was particularly bold or new; it was all based on plans that the CTA or Metra had previously pitched. (Mayor Richard J. Daley advocated nearly 60 years ago for the Red Line extension, which has yet to break ground.) The key was the timing. Preckwinkle had recently repealed her predecessor Todd Stroger's sales tax hike of an extra cent on every dollar spent, and Grimshaw hoped to persuade her to reinstate it to match the federal funds for local rail projects.

So why did Transit Future never come to be? Preckwinkle contends that it was more important to try to get the county's finances (including its pension obligations) in order before committing to a big spending plan such as Transit Future – and that there was no state budget for the project anyway.

Like Transit Future, Poppe's proposal tries to tackle a rider coverage gap that has long plagued local

Ashland/63rd
Cottage Gro
Ashland/63rd
Cottage Grove
cta
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Former RTA head Stephen Schlickman can't make sense of how the CTA spent its COVID relief money: "I'm sorry, they got billions of dollars from the federal government, and why the service, crime, filthiness of the CTA became so bad is beyond me."

transit, one that could be fixed with a circumferential train line that starts in the Far South Side, curves westward through the Southwest Side, provides a north-south route through the West Side, and then extends eastward to the Far North Side. There have been pushes in the past to make this arcing railway a reality, first in the early 2000s with the Mid-City Transitway, which would have used the rights of way intended for the canceled Crosstown Expressway, and then a few years later with the Circle Line (a compressed version of that earlier plan). Both failed because, as the CTA and the City Council slowly tried to hash out the planning and proposals with residents, the cost of heavy rail increased alongside the agency's financial troubles.

The circumferential line would be especially useful in postpandemic Chicago. By design, the L has traditionally served one function extremely well: shuttling people into and out of the Loop. But as more people work from home or in facilities spread across the city and suburbs, that design has become less apt. And since public transportation can no longer move everyone around efficiently, more and more commuters are getting around by car.

If you drive in Chicago, the effects of these changing patterns are plainly visible. Traffic is worse than ever, and not just on expressways but also on major arterial streets like Western and Ashland. In early January, the transportation analytics firm Inrix published a widely circulated and alarming report: Chicago is tied with New York City for the second-worst traffic in the world, with drivers spending an average of 102 hours a year in gridlock.

As someone who was involved with both the Mid-City Transitway and Circle Line proposals, Schlickman thinks expansion is a pipe dream. “It’s unaffordable,” the former RTA chief says. “Unless we get politics to change and give mass transit equal priority as highway investment money-wise, it’s just not going to happen.” And he’s not talking about local financing only. The CTA’s budget is roughly split in two: half for operations, which are largely covered by the city and state, and half for capital projects (infrastructure and service improvements), which are highly reliant on federal funds. If you’ve been keeping up with current events, you know that Chicago can’t count on more money from the feds anytime soon.

Joseph Schofer, a longtime transit expert who recently retired as a professor of civil and environmental engineering at Northwestern University, takes Schlickman’s reasoning a step further: Is it even prudent to keep building rail in Chicago? “To intensify and extend an extraordinarily expensive technology in a point in history where everything about technology is changing, when you’re losing population in the city, it wouldn’t be a good investment if you had the money, and you don’t have the money.” The other problem, he points out, is that upgrading rail keeps getting pricier. “I’m really fed up with reading articles where some idiot says, ‘You know, everybody wants this.’ Does everybody know what it costs? Tell me if China’s losing its shirt on running high-speed rail. Spain has more high-speed rail than any place else in Europe, and they’re crushed by the subsidy costs. Does it make any sense? Not to me.”

That said, he stresses that the L is critical to the city. Many people still depend on the train, and it remains irreplaceable as a means of getting to the Loop. But he believes that local government and the CTA should be focused on trying to maintain the system at peak performance, budgeting for nothing beyond that, including rail expansion. He thinks the CTA would be smarter to shift its priorities toward bus rapid transit, or BRT: dedicated lanes with roadway priority for buses and nicer, larger stations. Chicago already has around 15 miles of such lanes, but that pales in comparison with the more than 100 miles in the much smaller city of Minneapolis. To Schofer, the Red Line extension is money that could have been better spent. Not only would BRT be a lot cheaper, but technology is on its side: Automation is coming. “I’m not talking about Teslas and Elon Musk,” he says. “I’m talking about a really fully automated, very individualized system, which is maybe 20 years out at best. If I build heavy rail transit, I ought to be building that for 50 to 100 years, and it’s gonna go south before I get to the end of its life.”

When I ask Poppe about this line of argument, she laughs gently. “Regardless of whether you have all the autonomous technology, there’s always going to be speed limitations when you are operating on the street with pedestrians and bikes and other vulnerable road users,” she says. The reason she favors the Red Line extension over BRT along the same corridor is simple: It’s all about the distance. A fast, unobstructed mode of travel from 130th Street to the Loop, which still has the highest concentration of jobs in the city, provides the best return on investment.

Poppe and her department are studying how AI and automation could help the CTA mitigate issues with staffing, efficiency, and safety. She emphasizes that implementing new technology wouldn’t mean a loss in jobs – it would mean imagining new ways to make the trains more efficient. In the next few years, the CTA will be rolling out more of its latest cars, the 7000 series, which come not only with GPS, making the Train Tracker more accurate, but automated people counters that can direct passengers to less crowded cars and aid with weight distribution, helping trains move more smoothly. The agency is in the very early stages of studying autonomous braking technology that would allow trains to stop at stations more precisely and reduce the technical requirements for operators. And last year the CTA instituted a somewhat controversial pilot program with the software company ZeroEyes to scan surveillance footage for guns using AI.

But no matter what technological advances are made, Schofer points out, there’s no escaping that the L’s troubles aren’t just the province of the CTA; they’re symptomatic of the city’s long-standing issues: poverty, segregation, and local politicians’ inability to deal with them in an effective manner. “Chicago has a truckload of social problems that are driving people out,” he says, “and building better trains isn’t going to bring them back in.”

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35

The creation of the MMA is a big swing. But truly revitalizing the L is going to require more than a new agency and a major infusion of capital. It will demand bold thinking and unencumbered commitment.

Whatever happens next with Chicago's transit system will be decided 200 miles south of here, in Springfield. The CTA had been counting on ridership returning to prepandemic levels by now, bringing fare revenue back up, but that hasn't happened. And with the city financially unable to "meet the moment," to borrow the CTA's oft-derided slogan for its postpandemic revival plan, the state is the agency's last recourse for avoiding its fiscal cliff. Governor JB Pritzker and the Illinois General Assembly saw this coming. In January 2023, they charged the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, a regional government organization, with drawing up a comprehensive report on the region's transit problems and the potential solutions.

Its *Plan of Action for Regional Transit* is an astonishing document, a 130-page nuts-and-bolts survey of local transit. The report is filled with colorful and illuminating charts and graphs, many of which helpfully illustrate the sorry state of our public transit system. The most damning of them is figure 39, a labyrinth of lines

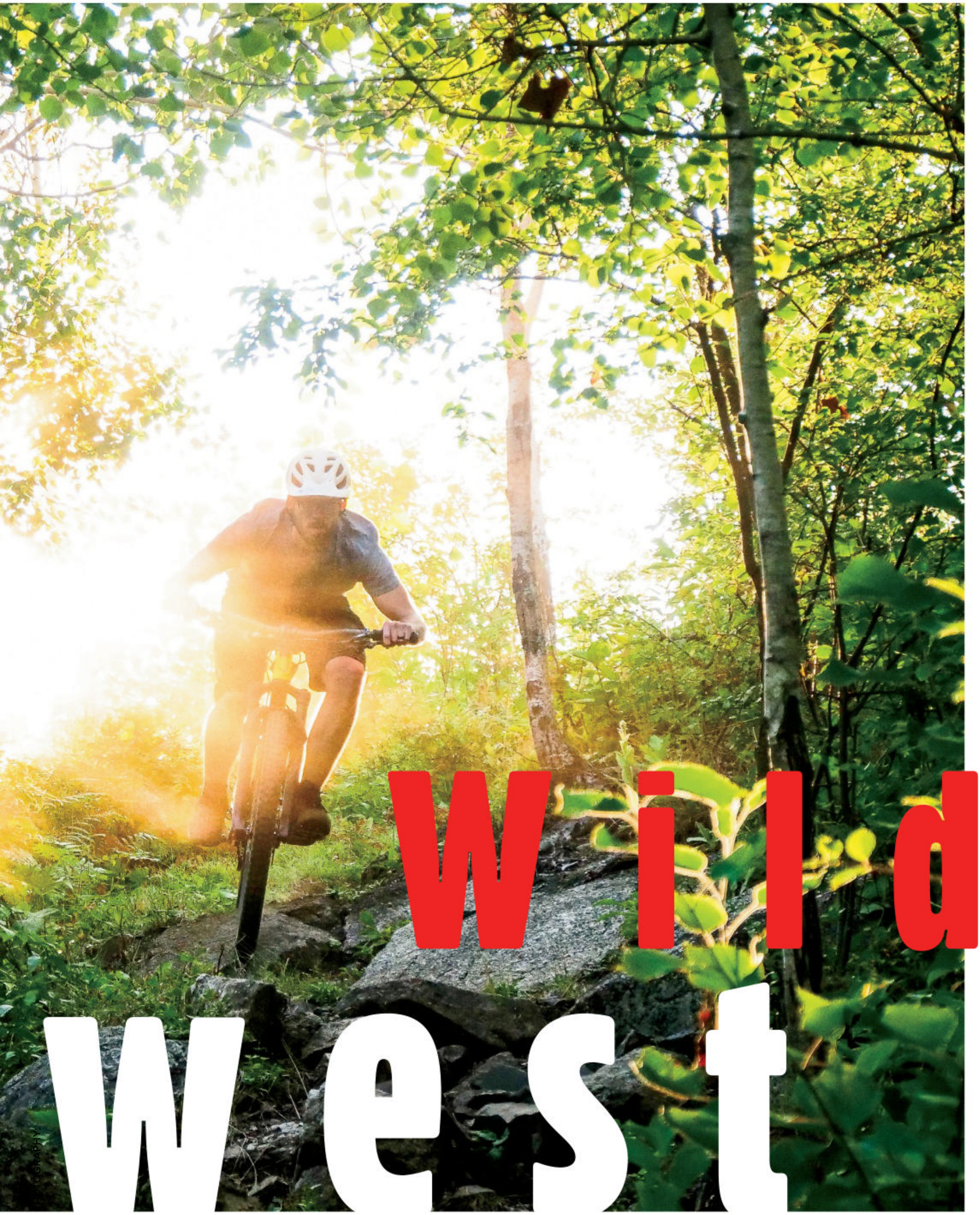
(Continued on page 100)

The Wild, Mid

PHOTOGRAPHY:

You don't need to hop on a plane to California or Colorado to find adventure. Whether you want to spend your vacation surfing, climbing, or biking, here are 12 epic getaways within a few hours' drive.

BY NINA KOKOTAS HAHN



Wild West

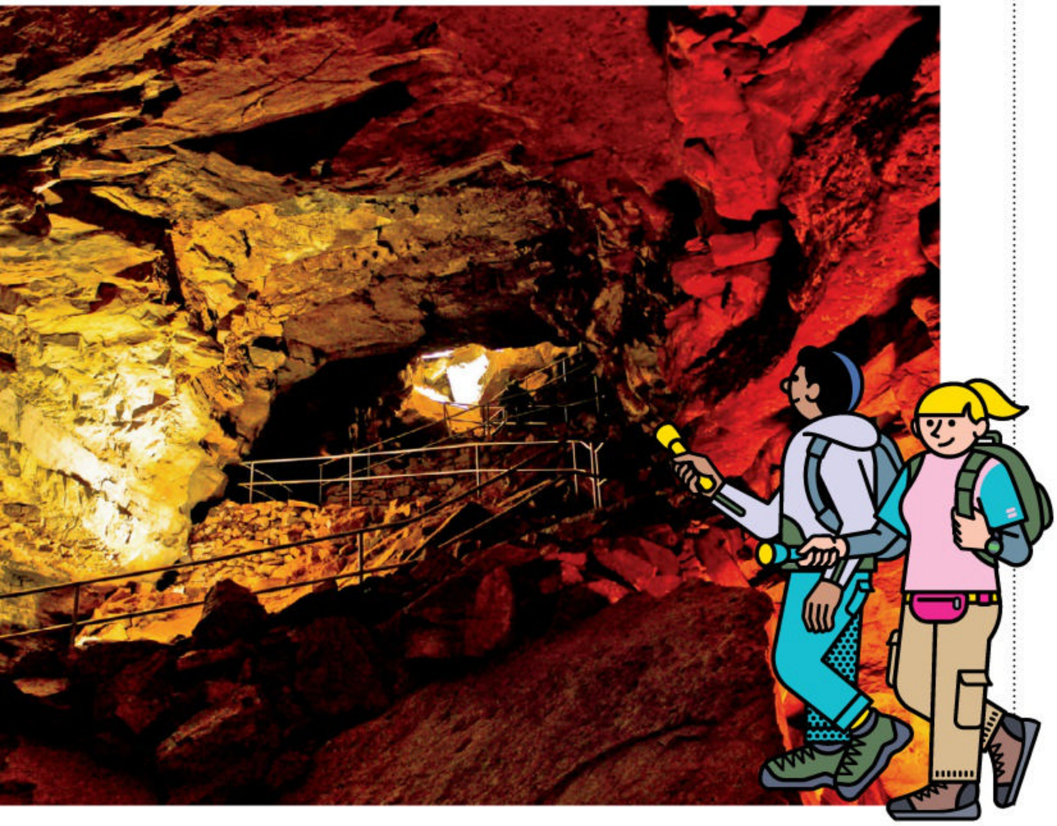
HOTOGRAPHY:

EXPLORE THE LONGEST CAVE SYSTEM ON THE PLANET

MAMMOTH CAVE NATIONAL PARK, KENTUCKY
Drive time: 6 hours

With over 400 mapped miles, Mammoth Cave National Park, just outside Bowling Green, Kentucky, is the longest known cave system in the world. The only way to see its many subterranean rooms and passageways is to join a tour. There are more than 15 options, including accessible routes with an elevator to carry you 26 stories down, but for those who don't fear a little adventure (and more than a little claustrophobia), the six-hour Wild Cave Tour ($79) is the way to go. The guided five-mile trek will have you scrambling over rocks, crawling through tight spaces, and climbing cave walls. Reservations are recommended, and participants must be 16 or older.

WHILE THERE More than just caves, the UNESCO-designated national park spans nearly 53,000 acres of rolling hills and forested trails. Take the half-mile Echo River Spring Walk, a ranger-led hike, to learn more about Mammoth's karst landscape.



GRAVEL-BIKE THE ROLLING HILLS OF THE DRIFTLESS

GALENA, ILLINOIS
Drive time: 2 hours 45 minutes

At the southeast tip of the Driftless Area, a rugged region in the upper Mississippi River basin that was spared glacial flattening, Galena is defined by undulating hills and river valleys: bucolic scenery that makes for epic gravel biking. Chicago transplant James Hillis of Driftless Cycling Tours can point you in the right direction with an itinerary ($50) or even guide you himself on long rides across everything from paved roads to off-road trails, including overnight stops (starting at $200). For rentals, he recommends Bicycle World in Dubuque, Iowa, just across the Mississippi. (Try a Trek drop bar bike for an intense ride; it's $60 for half a day or $100 for a full day). Rail-to-trail conversions along the Galena River are great for beginners, while more advanced riders will want to pedal south to the rural areas of Jo Daviess County for short, steep climbs and descents.

WHILE THERE See the Driftless from a new perspective on a sunrise or sunset hot-air balloon ride with Galena on the Fly, which offers a 45-minute flight that launches from Eagle Ridge Resort & Spa ($250).

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAMI NIEMI

KAYAK THROUGH DOOR COUNTY'S ROCKY COAST

STURGEON BAY, WISCONSIN
Drive time: 4 hours 30 minutes

The best way to see the splendor of Door County's shore? The roughly four-mile-round-trip trek from Sturgeon Bay to Whitefish Dunes State Park led by Door County Kayak Tours ($145). On the way, you'll explore the region's rocky dolomite features and paddle near a blowhole at Cave Point County Park. Nicknamed Death's Door for their shipwreck history, the waters around Door County's peninsula are home to more than 275 lost ships, including the *Australasia*, a woooden freighter that sunk in 1896 that you can paddle over. Closer to shore, tourgoers can jump from a cliff into a bowl-shaped swimming hole known as the Devil's Bathtub, which is less foreboding than it sounds. If you are up for more adventure, finish with a challenging two-mile out-and-back hike to the top of Old Baldy, the tallest dune in the park, at 93 feet above lake level.

WHILE THERE Head north to Washington Island, home to the largest lavender fields in the Midwest. During peak season, July and August, you can sip apple-lavender cider at Island Orchard Cider and dine at Fragrant Isle, which uses the flowering plant in its Wednesday night summer dinners ($50 a person).

The Devil's Bathtub at Cave Point County Park

PHOTOGRAPHY: (CAVE) GETTY IMAGES; (BIKE) MICHAEL DILLON; (KAYAK) COURTESY DOOR COUNTY KAYAK TOURS; *PREVIOUS SPREAD* BRICE SHIRBACH

FLY-FISH SPRING CREEKS

VIROQUA, WISCONSIN
Drive time: 4 hours

Viroqua sits in the heart of the Driftless Area, where clear, cold freshwater filters through unglaciated limestone and sandstone, producing abundant spring creeks. "That provides extremely good trout fishing," says Mat Wagner, owner of the Driftless Angler, a fishing supply store in town. These types of creeks are rare across the country but not in the Driftless Area. "In our county alone," says Wagner, "it's something on the magnitude of 270 miles of trout water and 65 individual creeks." These creeks are teeming with wild trout, hundreds of them per mile. At the Driftless Angler, you can pick up loaner rods and waders, as well as the right leaders and flies, get tips on the best locations, or hire a certified casting instructor to show you the ropes. Guided excursions, with supplies, start at $275 for a half day and $450 for a full. You'll mostly be catching brown and brook trout. "Guides practice catch and release," says Wagner, "but you can definitely take home a couple for the frying pan."

WHILE THERE Rent a road bike from Bluedog Cycles ($60 for four hours, $90 for a day) to enjoy southwest Wisconsin scenery from the road. Another must try: the organic beef tenderloin with white truffle oil and the buttermilk-dredged fried chicken sandwich at Viroqua's Driftless Café, co-owned by Luke Zahm, a former James Beard semifinalist for best chef in the Midwest.

NAIL YOUR WHITEWATER ROLLS

WAUSAU, WISCONSIN
Drive time: 4 hours 15 minutes

There are few better places to learn to kayak rapids than Wausau Whitewater Park. It spans a third of a mile of the Wisconsin River and benefits from a dam-controlled channel in downtown Wausau that delivers consistent flow for ideal whitewater conditions. Open from June through September, the park has one of the longest urban courses in the Midwest, featuring everything from flatwater to a variety of challenging wave formations. Beginners can start with a three-hour lesson ($55, including equipment) to learn key moves, such as how to roll a kayak and ferry across a current. Want to see the pros in action? On August 16 and 17, the park will host the Midwest Freestyle Championships.

WHILE THERE Need to give those paddling arms a rest? The Granite Peak Ski Resort offers hiking trails and scenic chairlift rides. For something more competitive, sign up for the June 14 Ironbull Solstice Summit Challenge, a grueling mile-long race to the top of Rib Mountain that features a 700-foot gain in elevation.

CAMP UNDER THE STARS

PENFIELD, ILLINOIS
Drive time: 2 hours

About 45 minutes northeast of Champaign lies the Middle Fork River Forest Preserve, the only designated International Dark Sky Park in Illinois. Protected from light pollution, the preserve's North Waterfowl Management Area stays open 24 hours a day for night-sky viewing. Added last spring: the Dark Sky Trail, which winds a mile through tall grasses and offers expansive sky views, ending at a new observatory with a retractable roof. (Note: It's for scientific research; you have to bring your own telescope.) The preserve has also added 11 stargazing-friendly campsites, available May through October ($85 a night if you want electricity, or as low as $20 if you're fine going primitive; online reservations are required at least three days in advance).

WHILE THERE Want something a bit less rustic? Stay at the new farmhouse at Prairie Fruits Farm & Creamery ($300 a night), the state's first goat dairy farm, which offers award-winning cheeses and farm-to-table dining onsite. Learn to make cheese—or settle for just eating it.

MOUNTAIN-BIKE SOME OF THE WORLD'S BEST TRAILS

DULUTH, MINNESOTA
Drive time: 7 hours

Nestled on Lake Superior's coastline, Duluth offers more than 90 miles of bike trails. That's impressive enough, but what really sets it apart is its designation by the International Mountain Bicycling Association, which recognizes the best large-scale facilities for all skill levels, as one of just six gold-level sites in the world. Ansel Schimpff of the Cyclists of Gitchee Gumee Shores, a local mountain biking advocacy group, suggests that riders with some experience try the new intermediate trail at Spirit Mountain, which comes with the bonus of lift service (it's a ski hill in winter). "It's two to three miles, has nice rollers and wide-open corners," Schimpff says. For beginners, he suggests Spirit's Happy Camper trail. You can rent a bike at Skihut, across the street ($65 for four hours, $100 for a full day). There's also the 2.5-mile Home Brew trail (pictured above and on pages 68–69), as well as the crowd-pleasing Duluth Traverse, a 40-mile trail high above the lake that links the east and west sides of the city, taking you through town as well as the backcountry. For another iconic trek, drop 500 feet on the Craft Connector and directly into Duluth's craft brewery district, where Schimpff recommends finishing your ride with a cold one at Bent Paddle Brewing Co.

WHILE THERE Given the northerly climate, it's little surprise that Duluth has a robust sauna culture, dating back to the 1800s. Cedar & Stone offers guided Nordic sauna experiences, with options ranging from social saunas ($49 a person) to a private guided session on a floating sauna ($99).

SHRED SAND DUNES

MEARS, MICHIGAN
Drive time: 3 hours 30 minutes

The Silver Lake Sand Dunes straddle 2,000 acres of mesmerizing slopes between Lake Michigan and Silver Lake, with 450 of those acres open to off-road vehicles from April through October. You can rent a ride from Silver Lake Buggy Rentals, one of the only operators in the area to offer a drive-your-own experience. There are four different models to choose from (from $250 for one hour to $1,199 for six); book two hours with the KRX four-seater ($540), said by Silver Lake Buggy's pros to be the best hill climber with the smoothest ride. You'll follow a guide for an orientation lap to get used to driving on sand (it feels a lot like driving over snow) before cutting loose across flats, around trees, and over dunes up to 14 stories tall. You can ride as far as the beach on Lake Michigan. Tip: Bring sunglasses to shield your eyes from all that flying sand.

WHILE THERE The best way to camp at Silver Lake Sand Dunes is in a one- or two-bedroom RV from Silver Lake RV Rental (from $135 a night). Delivered to the site for you, the home on wheels comes stocked with dishes, a coffeepot, an outdoor kitchen and grill, and (thankfully, for those who don't want to rough it) toilet paper.

PHOTOGRAPHY: (STAR GAZING) ALAN HUANG; (MOUNTAIN BIKE) BRICE SHIRBACH; (SAND DUNES) KELLY NIEPOKUJ; *PREVIOUS SPREAD* COURTESY OF DRIFTLESS ANGLER

SURF OCEAN-LIKE WAVES

ST. JOSEPH, MICHIGAN
Drive time: 1 hour 35 minutes

While Sheboygan is often billed as the Malibu of the Midwest, you'll find equally good waves more consistently on the other side of Lake Michigan. In St. Joseph, just north of Harbor Country, Tyler Spence of Stoke Riders provides what he calls "real surf lessons in actual surf." For $90, Spence and his team offer a 90-minute private session, including a surfboard and wetsuit, at an ideal beginner's spot – likely the sheltered pier area in St. Joe, a favorite for its clean, gentle waves. For more advanced swell, Spence can take you to killer off-the-radar spots frequented by seasoned surfers, provided you follow the first rule of surf club: "Don't blow up a spot while it's happening." Translation: Save your Instagram post for later.

WHILE THERE No waves? No problem. Stoke Riders can swap your surf lesson for one on an eFoil board (think electric-powered surfboard, with a fin-like hydrofoil underneath; a three-hour session for one person costs $275). Within an hour, you'll be gliding on water at speeds up to 30 mph. It's also excellent preparation for wing foiling, a next-level version that involves harnessing wind by holding a sail-like contraption.

The point off Silver Beach in St. Joseph

GO CHASING WATERFALLS

MARQUETTE, MICHIGAN
Drive time: 6 hours

Set on Lake Superior in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Marquette County is the ideal spot for an active vacation, with an extensive trail network, mountainous rock formations, sandstone cliffs, and 83 miles of shoreline. It also boasts upward of 70 waterfalls, more than any other county in the state. The best way to see them is by trail running, ideally in the spring, when seasonal blooms and daytime temps in the 50s create ideal conditions. The local experts at Queen City Running Company recommend the 8.2-mile Green Loop, a southern trail of the Noquemanon Trail Network, for its uphills, downhills, switchbacks, and views of the 20-foot Morgan Falls. In addition, in the northwest corner of town, you'll find the NTN's easily accessible Wright Street Falls. Farther north, a 2.2-mile trail and a more challenging 7.6-mile one both deliver you to the Little Garlic Falls, which spills over a large sandstone rock wall into a deep pool.

WHILE THERE The largest city in the U.P. is an ideal base camp for adventures all along the coast, including at Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, less than an hour away. Book a kayak tour with Paddling Michigan ($126 for three hours) for optimal views of the staggering cliffs, colorful rock faces, and waterfalls that plummet right into Lake Superior.

TACKLE NEW ROCK-CLIMBING ROUTES

FERNE CLYFFE STATE PARK, ILLINOIS
Drive time: 5 hours

Devil's Lake State Park in Wisconsin might be the most popular nearby rock-climbing destination, but don't sleep on the 2,430-acre Ferne Clyffe State Park in southern Illinois, half an hour southeast of Carbondale. Located in the Shawnee Hills, it has Pennsylvania sandstone cliffs hundreds of millions of years old that have been drawing climbers for decades. In 2023, the park partnered with the Illinois Climbers Association to update its handful of routes with bolted safety anchors and create more than 50 new paths, with plans for 150 in total. There are plenty of options for both beginners and elite climbers. Families will enjoy Boat Rock, a new climbing area with eight walls and—just a 10-minute walk away—a campground with grills, drinking water, toilets, and showers.

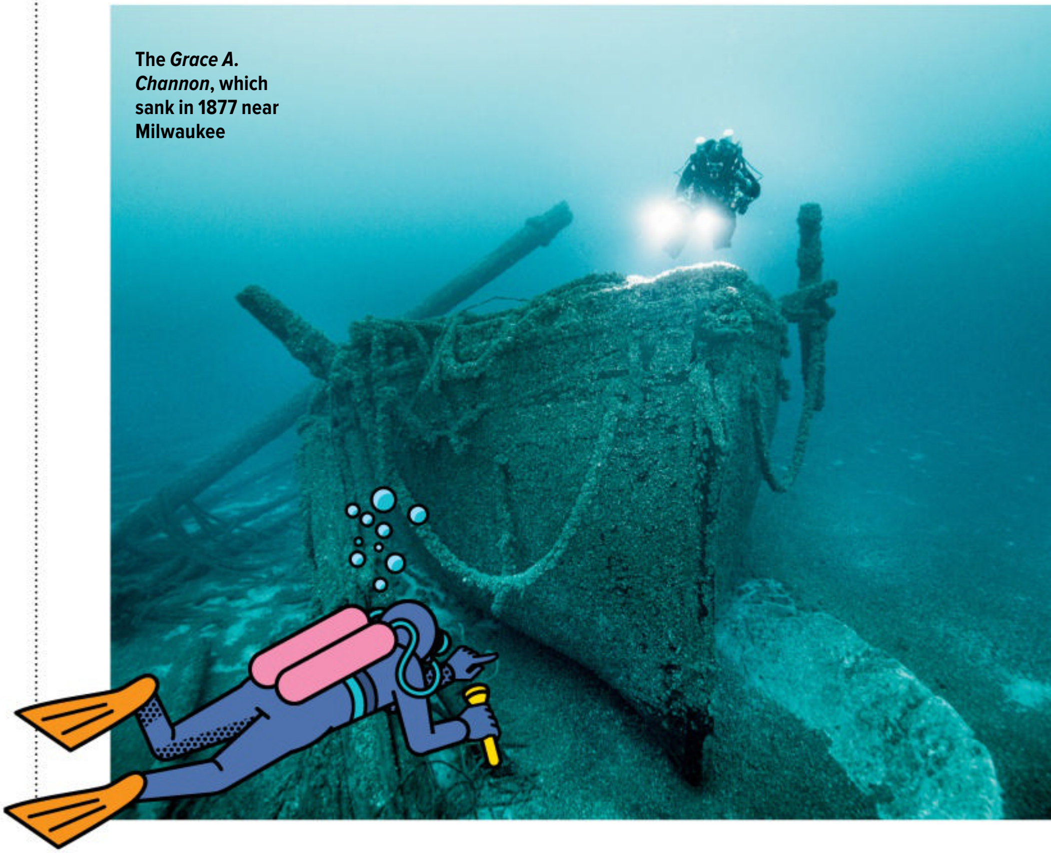
WHILE THERE More top climbing destinations are within a 30-minute drive. Shawnee National Forest's Jackson Falls, with its 30-to-70-foot canyon walls, has over 550 routes, more than any other park in the state. And don't miss Return to Forever, a challenging boulder traverse at Giant City State Park.

DIVE IN A SHIPWRECK SANCTUARY

MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
Drive time: 1 hour 30 minutes

The Great Lakes have claimed between 6,000 and 10,000 ships over the centuries, with the biggest share of those lying at the bottom of Lake Michigan. The best way to see them? A scuba dive in the little-known but massive Wisconsin Shipwreck Coast National Marine Sanctuary, which covers 962 square miles along the state's shore, from Port Washington to Kewaunee County. Established in 2021, the sanctuary boasts 36 known shipwrecks (and 60 others still to be located), with plenty of others resting just off Milwaukee, and they are generally well preserved thanks to the lack of destructive shipworms in Lake Michigan's cold waters. Jitka Hanakova, who helped discover the *L.R. Doty* and *Alice E. Wilds* wrecks, offers charters for certified divers via Shipwreck Explorers. You'll depart from Milwaukee on a 28-foot Marinette customized for scuba diving ($270 for a full-day expedition). Among the other wrecks you might see is the 1876 *Tennie and Laura*, which sank in 1903 and lies more than 300 feet beneath the surface. Tip: May and June typically afford the best visibility.

WHILE THERE Just over an hour north of Milwaukee by car, the town of Manitowoc is home to the Wisconsin Maritime Museum, the largest of its kind in the Midwest. It has an operating steam engine, a re-creation of a 19th-century shipbuilding town, and a fully restored 312-foot World War II submarine, the USS *Cobia*, which you can rent out for an overnight stay on Airbnb (starting at $500).

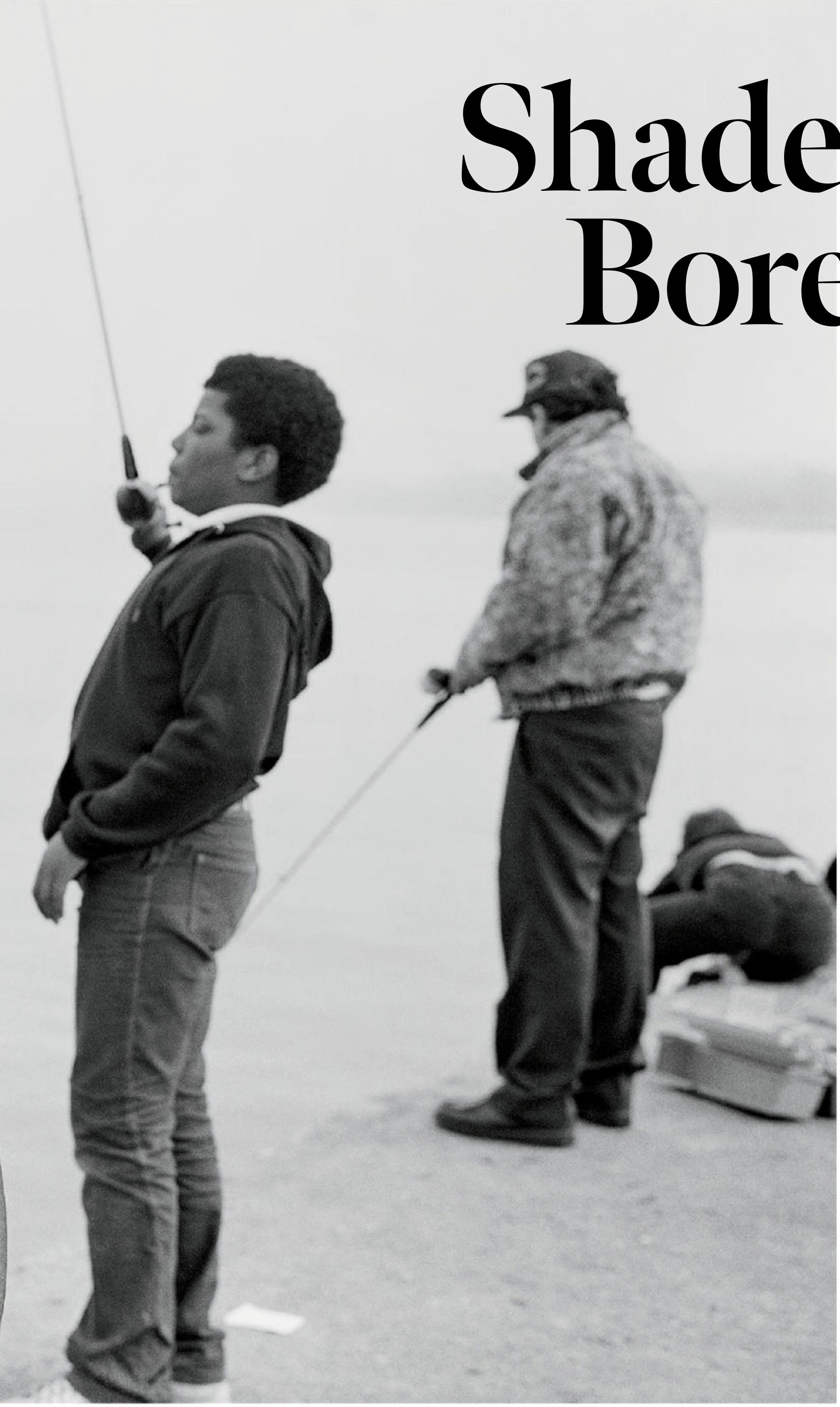


The *Grace A. Channon*, which sank in 1877 near Milwaukee

PHOTOGRAPHY: (WATERFALL) AARON PETERSON; (ROCK CLIMBING) SOUTHERNMOST ILLINOIS TOURISM BUREAU; (SHIPWRECK) BECKY KAGAN SCHOTT; *PREVIOUS SPREAD* RUSTY MALKEMES

Shades *of* Boredom

Newly published images by photographer Mark Steinmetz highlight everyday life in a Chicago of 35 years ago.

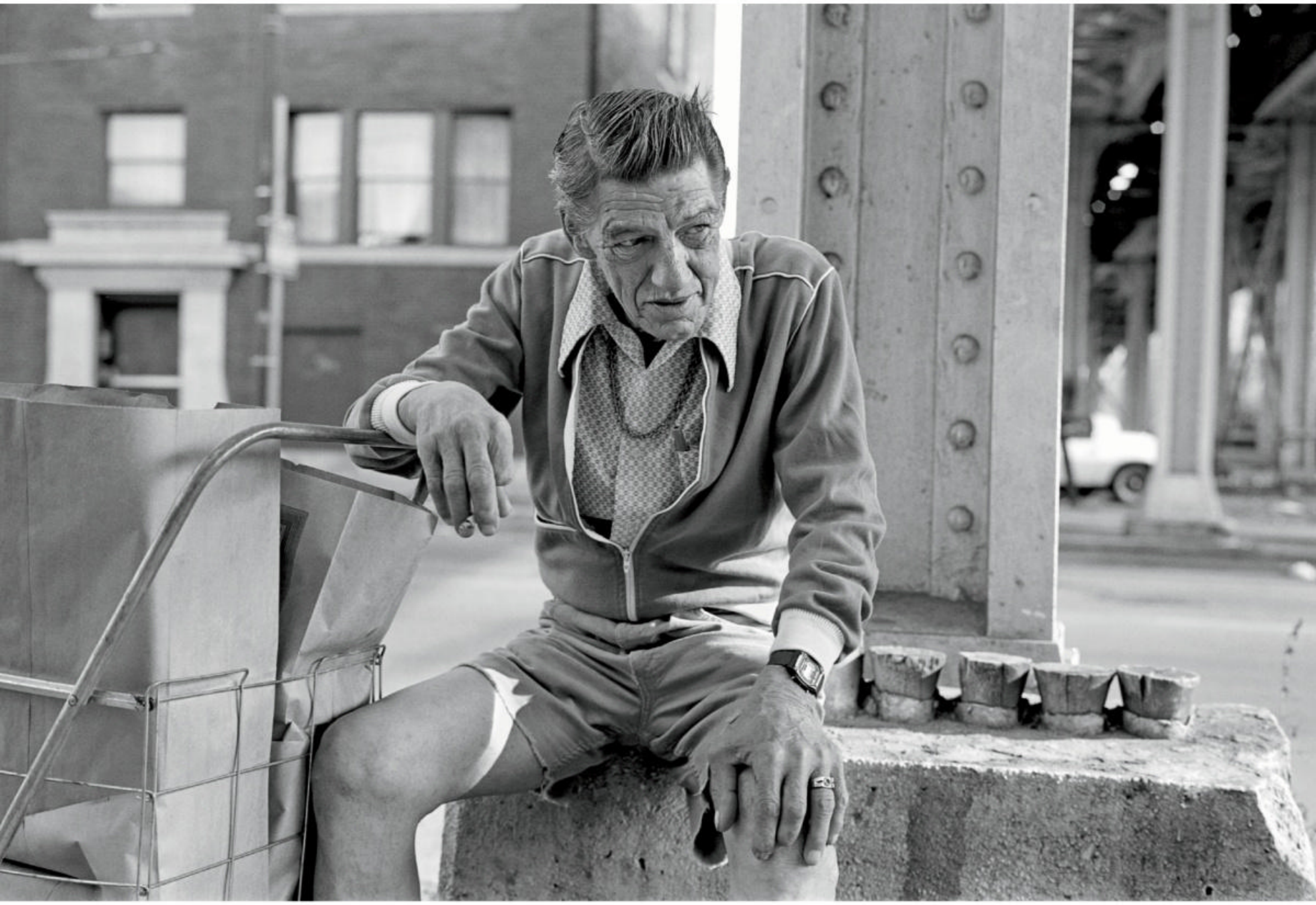


“Things were very slow at the Montrose Beach pier. This kid was bored,” says Steinmetz. “I’ve photographed a lot of kids, and I’ve always had an affinity for what they’re going through. The delicate gesture of putting his head in the small of his father’s back was a poignant moment.”

During his late 20s, while living in Chicago from 1988 to 1991, photographer Mark Steinmetz spent much of his time capturing images of everyday people in everyday situations. "I kind of think of myself as an archaeologist, but living in the time and just describing it," says Steinmetz, 64, a former Guggenheim fellow who now resides in Athens, Georgia, and whose works are in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, among other institutions. "Most photography is about happy people, thumbs-up kind of things, or dramatic moments," he notes. But he's more interested in what he describes as "shades of boredom," an emotion he thinks is "underdescribed in our culture."

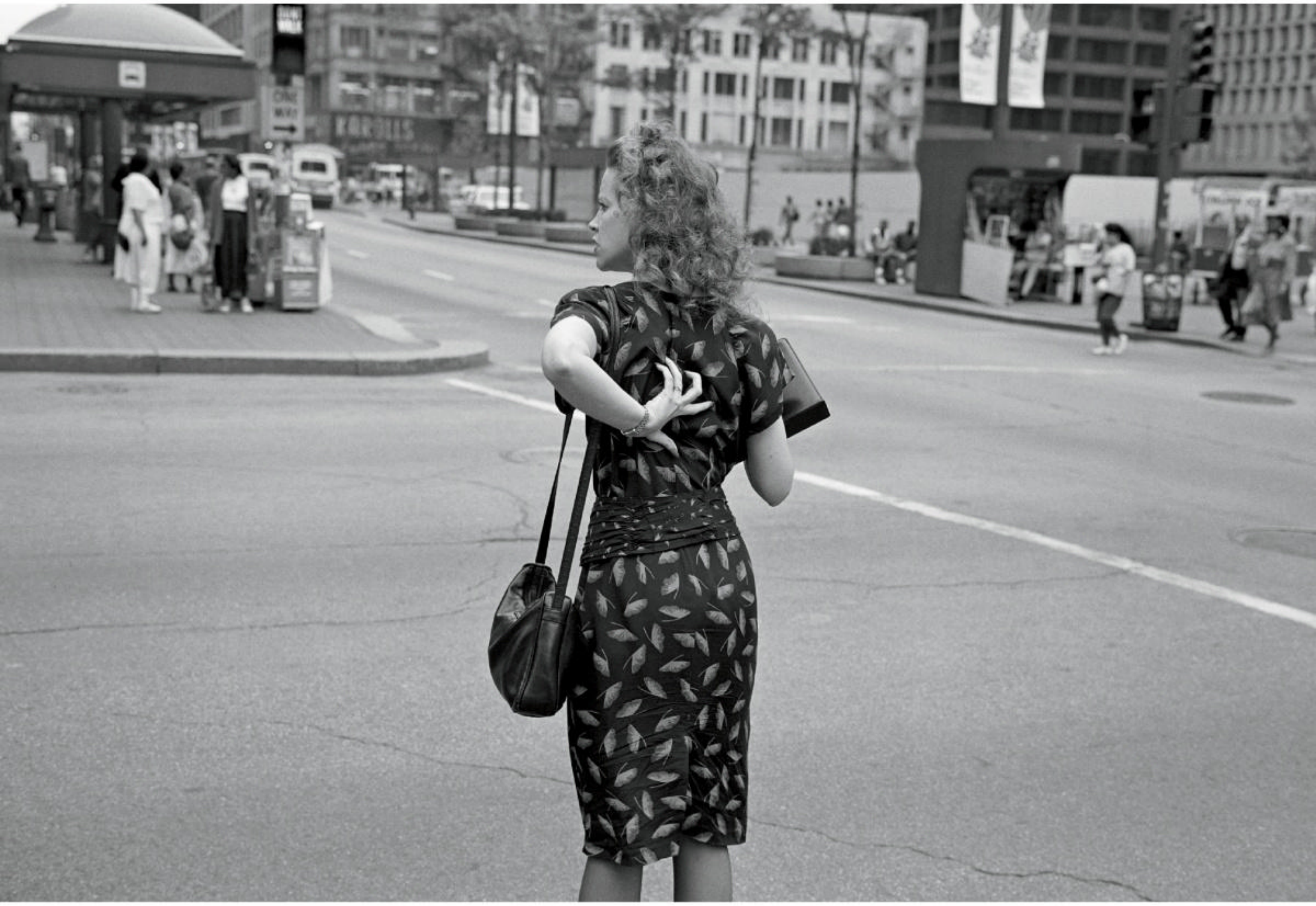
A number of his Chicago photos – shot with 35 mm and medium format cameras and developed in the bedroom of his Wrigleyville apartment – have appeared in books he has published over the years. But many more were stashed away, largely unseen by the public for three and a half decades. Taken mainly on the North Side and downtown, they have finally gotten their moment in his new book, *Chicago* (Nazraeli Press), and in a recent exhibition at the Stephen Daiter Gallery here.

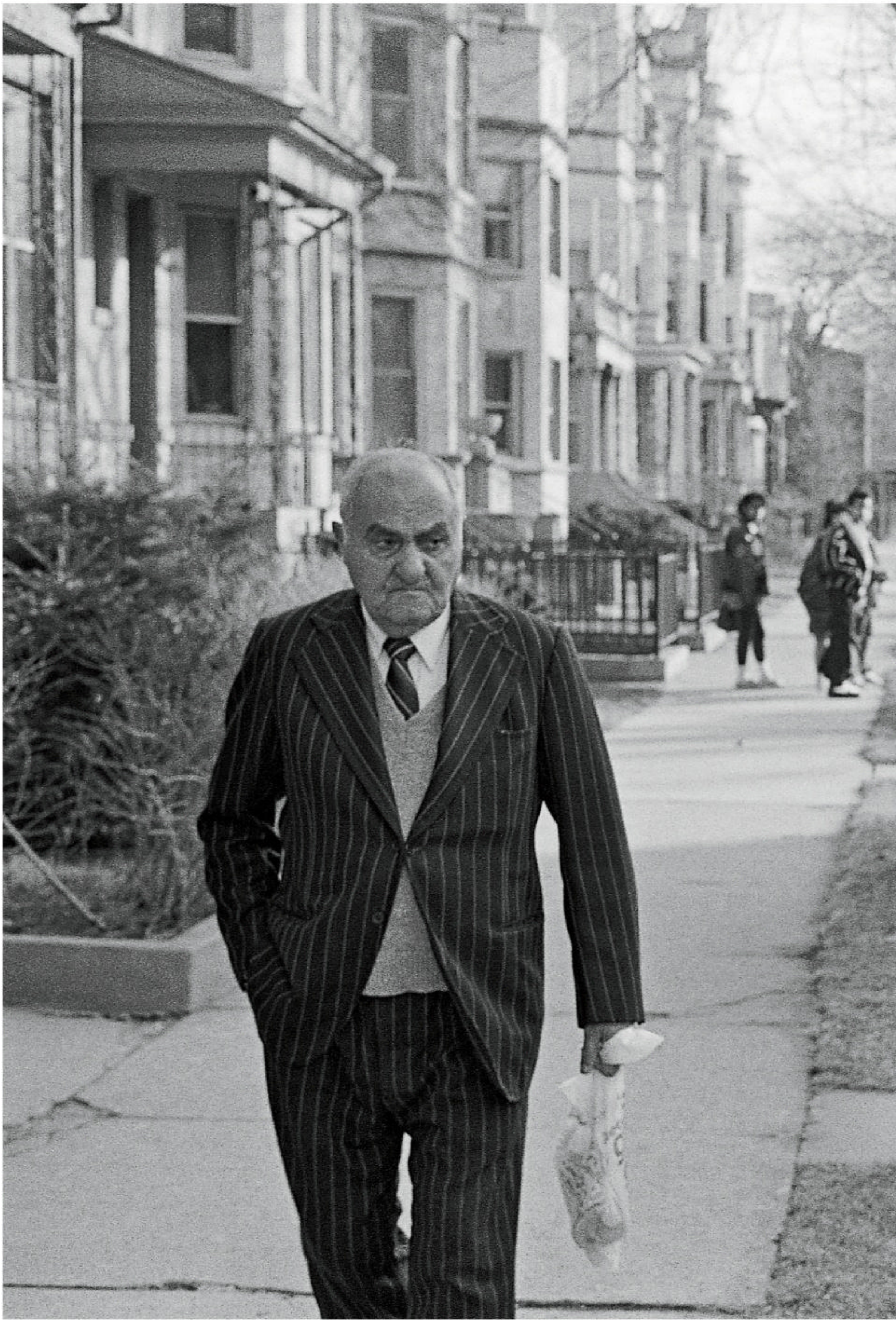
Steinmetz says he shot the series in black and white partly as an homage to the famous street photographers Weegee and Helen Levitt and partly because, free of a focus-stealing layer of color, the work is "more purely about light." Though his images are a human-centric time capsule of the city, they don't attempt to make a larger statement about the Chicago of that era: "You frame a portion of the world, and you're left with just the facts within that frame." –MIKE THOMAS



"This was on Montrose Avenue under the L tracks. The man is taking a breather on his way home with groceries in his cart. He has a certain style: his jewelry, his sports clothes with cutoff shorts. He's also missing part of the index finger on his right hand. He has a look that speaks to the experiences he's had in life."

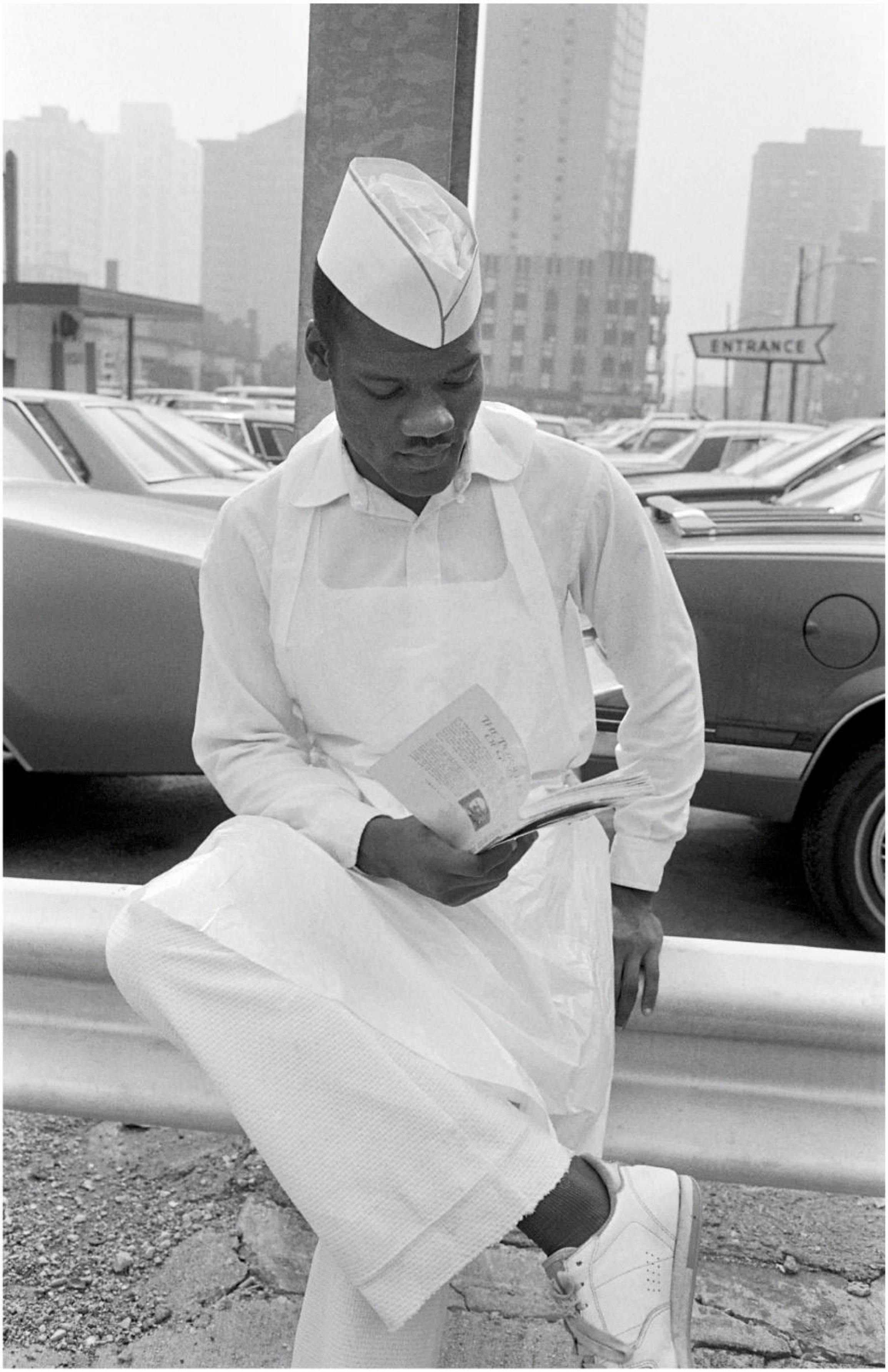
“Waiting to cross a street just seems interesting to me. It’s kind of related to boredom. There’s also something about this woman’s hand reaching to scratch her back that looks like some sort of spinning device. Or maybe it’s there because she feels like someone is looking at her back.”



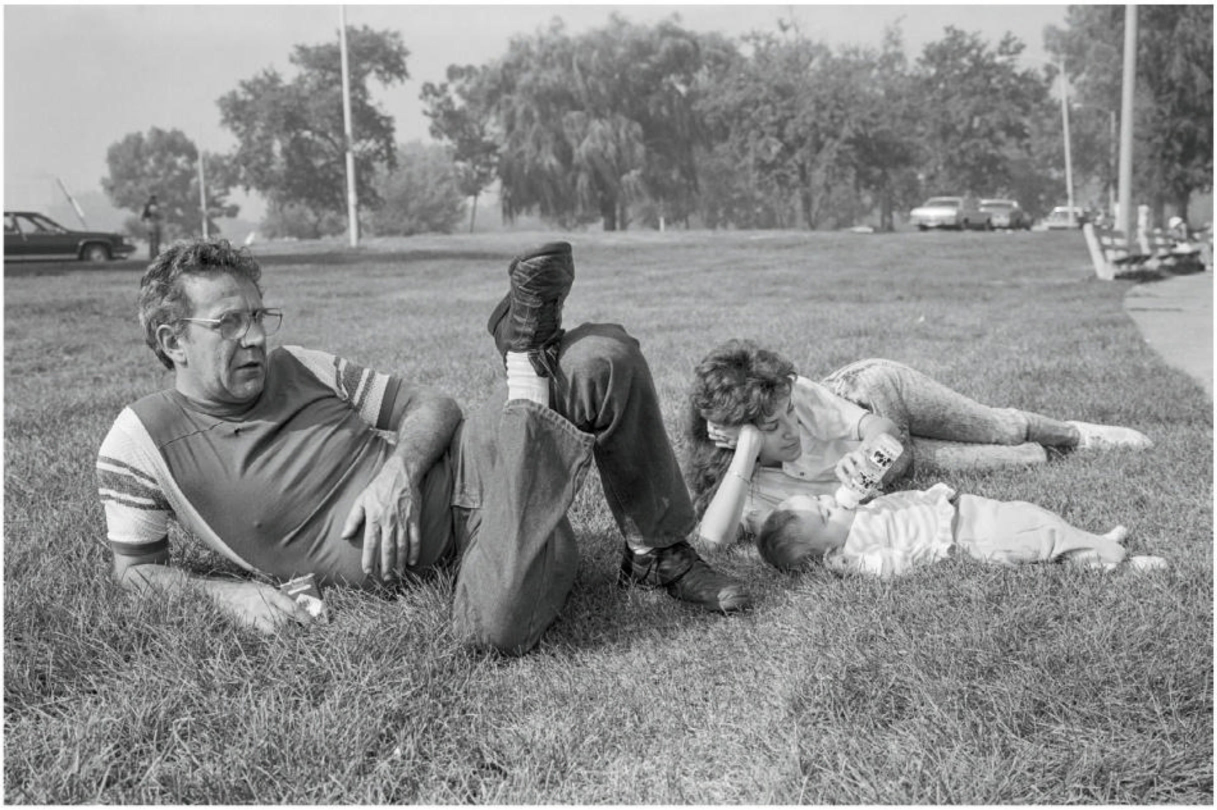


"I didn't see this accident happen, but I heard it from my apartment on Waveland and ran out to take some pictures. The man is in his dapper suit carrying something in an unglamorous twisted plastic bag instead of a briefcase—it's just surreal. It kind of looks like he might be in some way culpable, but he's not."

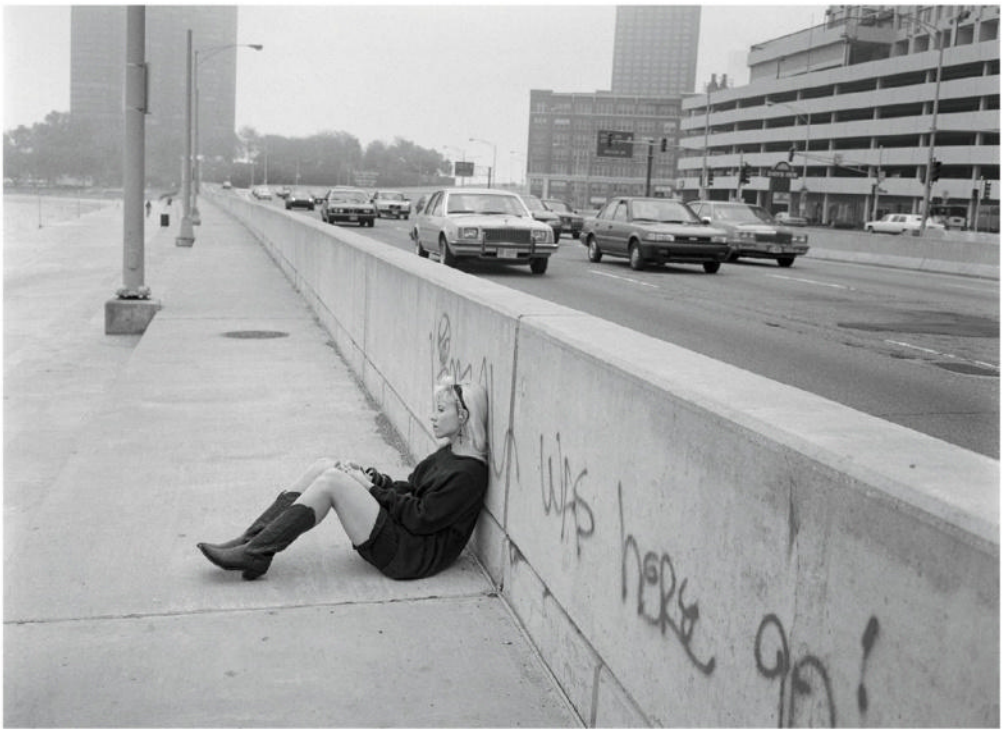
SW 684



“This man was on some kind of break downtown, reading a book with something about God in the title. It looks like he works for one of those hot dog places. The hem on his pants is interesting—why is it extended another inch? You can see all the cars parked in a certain way and that ‘Entrance’ sign and skyscrapers in the background. But it’s mostly about a man on a break.”

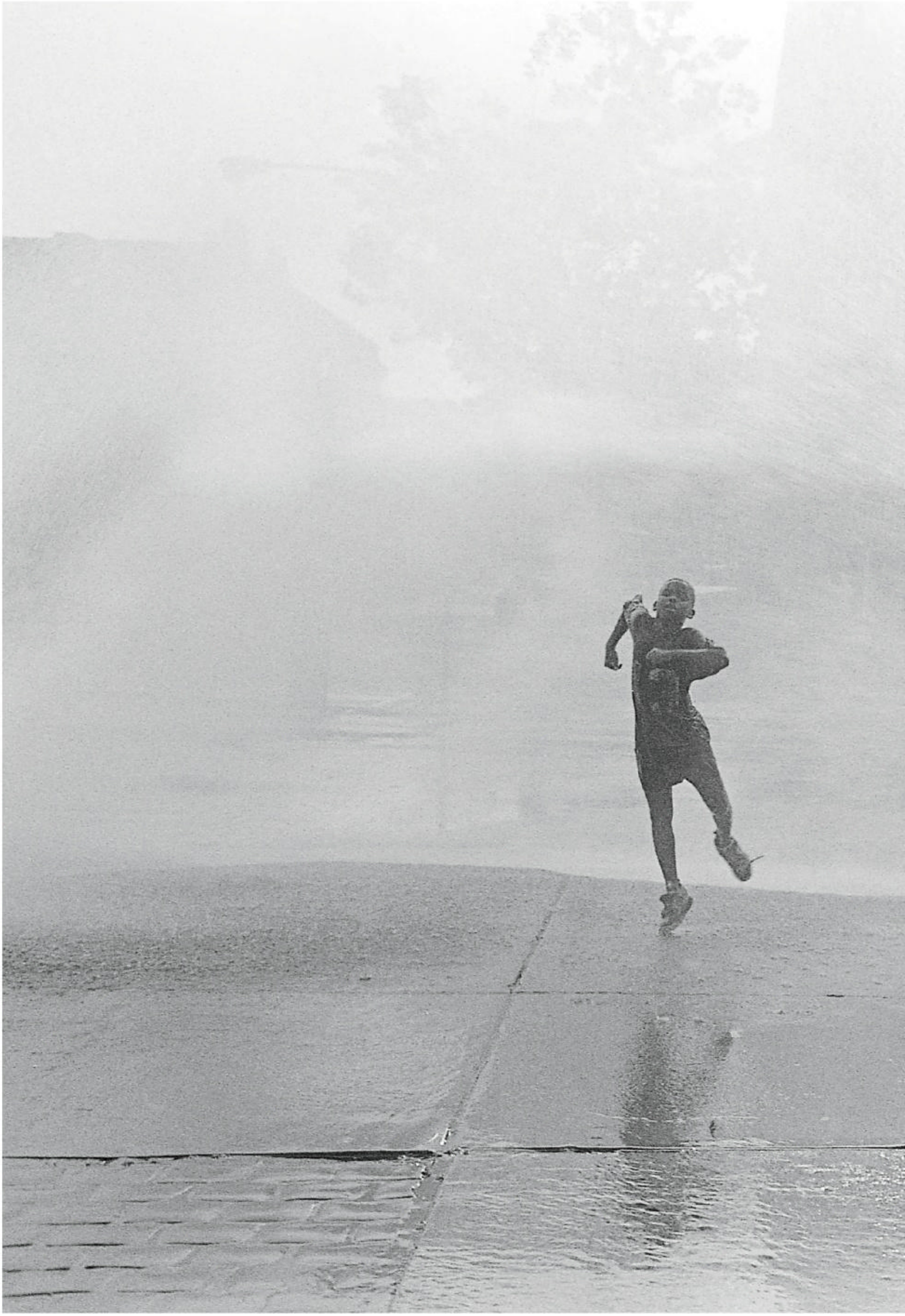


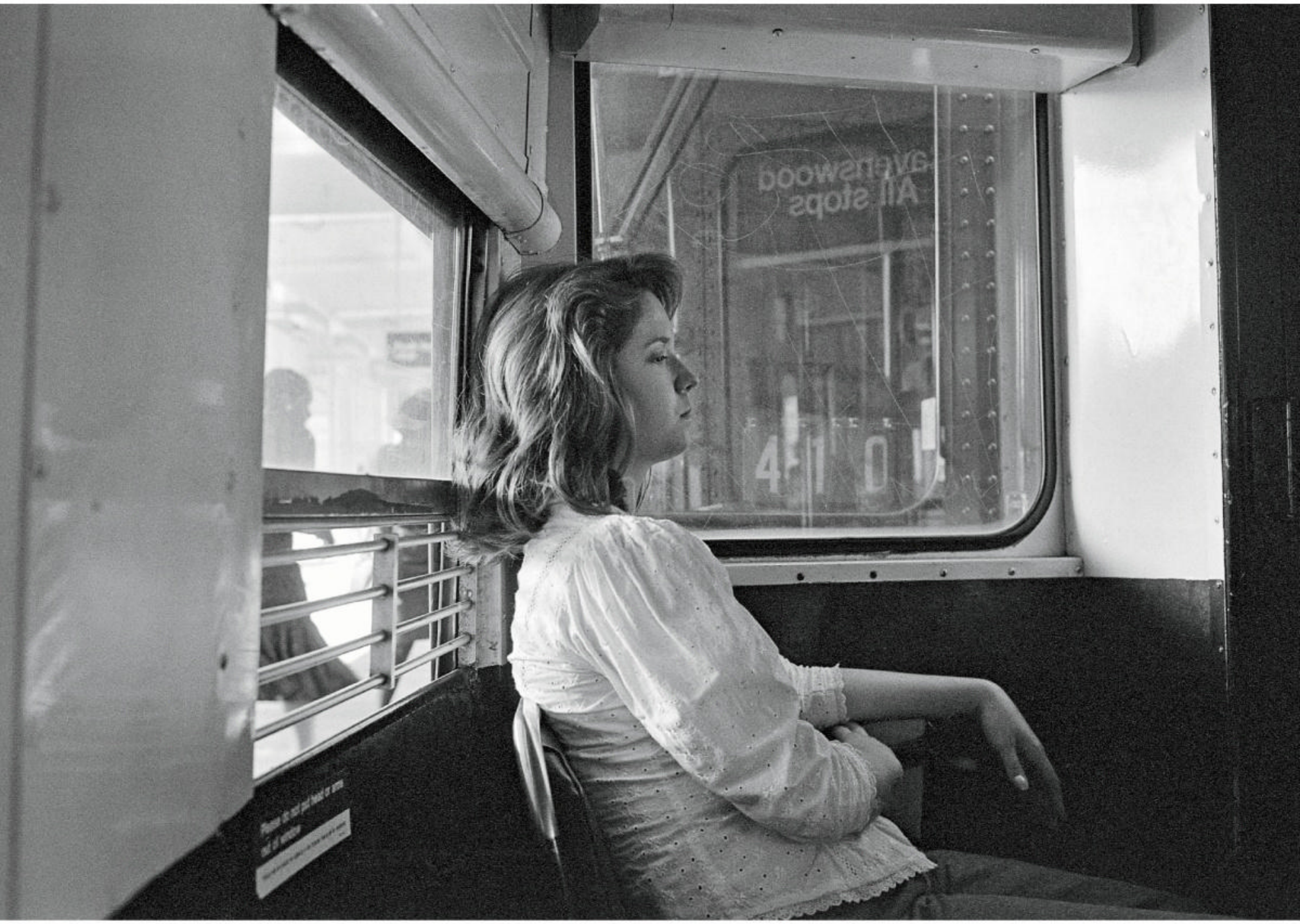
“I took this photograph near Montrose Beach of what seems to be a family. I like the man’s flexible nature — the whole stream and flow of arms and legs. The kid flat on his or her back with the baby bottle. The man holding a pack of cigarettes. You could say it’s an update on impressionist paintings by Seurat, Renoir, and others who depict leisure on Sunday afternoons in public places.”



“This woman at Oak Street Beach was just sort of tuned out, listening to music on headphones. The concrete barrier separates her from the onrushing traffic: She’s kind of in this safe zone, and beyond it’s rather unsafe. It’s a picture of trying to find peace in a difficult context.”

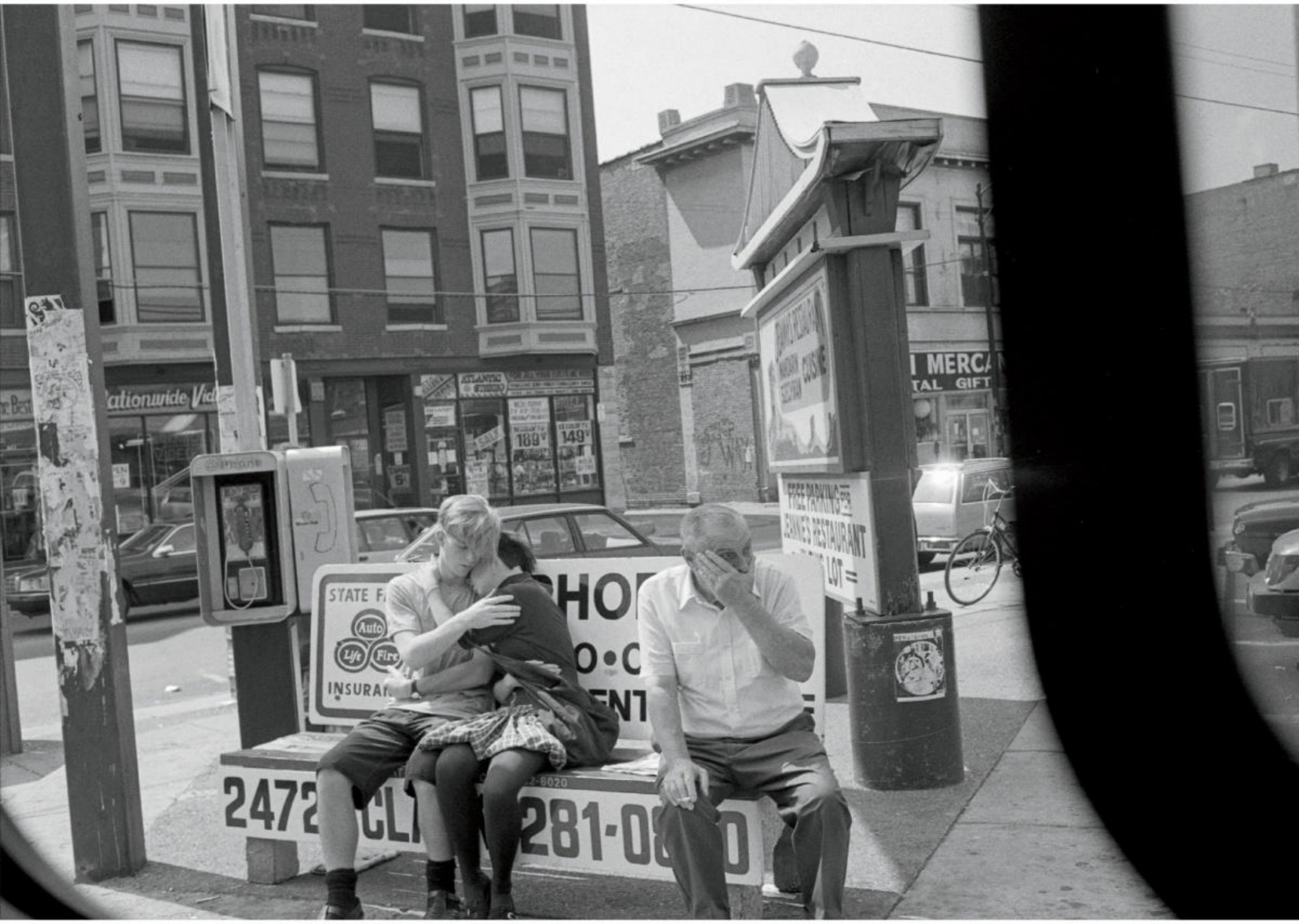
"The summers when I lived in Chicago were hot, and some of the neighborhoods would open up fire hydrants for instant refreshment. This kid dancing, balancing on one sneaker, is a beautiful gesture."





“People on trains now are always looking at a screen. Back then, you had to daydream or face your thoughts. This woman was on the Ravenswood Line, and I liked her solitude and contemplation, her state of being at ease. She’s well dressed, and you can see the way she sinks into her body, the way her wrist slopes down. There’s something very beautiful about her.”

“I was on a bus stopped at an intersection when I took this. The older man is holding a cigarette and cupping his mouth. It looks a little like he’s wiping away a tear. It’s like the Yeats poem ‘Sailing to Byzantium’: ‘That is no country for old men. The young / In one another’s arms ...’ ”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Photograph by EVAN SHEEHAN

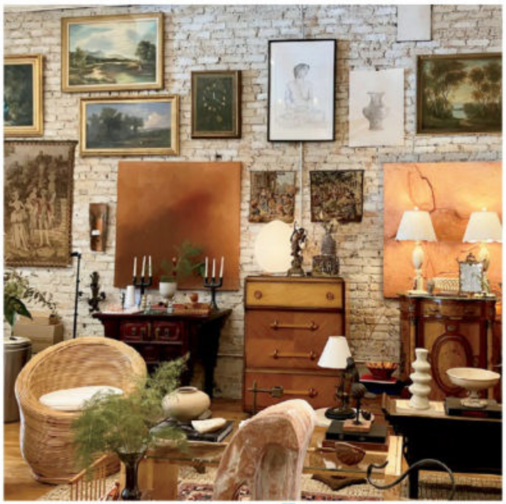
STORE EXPLORER

Szewai Lee

North Avenue is the "it" shopping strip for this dance instructor and busy mom.

By WEB BEHRENS

AS A SMALL-BUSINESS OWNER and mother of two young kids, Szewai Lee can't indulge like she once did. "When I go shopping, it's a special treat – some me time," says the 41-year-old founder of Duet Dance Studio, the Bucktown ballroom dance school. This June, she and her husband will open Winnie's Playroom, a children's play café and event space in Brookfield, not far from their home in Western Springs. But Lee still frequents her city stomping ground, which offers many of her favorite boutiques: "Growing up in Hong Kong, you could find everything right there on the street – all the restaurants and shops you need. North Avenue is like that."



CHICAGO PLANTS

2321 W. North Ave.,
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"I love plants, but sometimes I kill them because I'm too busy. Here it's simple to find easier-to-care-for houseplants."

WISH LIST

- **Bird of paradise** (1) "Imagine it in your living room, adding warmth to the space." *$28 to $248*
- **Funnel planter** (2) "It's simple, with the subtle surprise of asymmetrical design." *$48*
- ***Hoya kerrii*** "You don't need to water this much. I love the heart-shaped leaves." *$8 to $28*

MY MODERN OASIS

2418 W. North Ave.,
Logan Square

"It's like stepping into a museum. Every piece is unique, and the owner makes beautiful pottery."

WISH LIST

- **Arthur Braud squiggle vase** (3) "I go to a lot of art fairs, but I've never seen a vase like this." *$249*
- **Chaise longue** (4) "This is so dramatic. I'd love to have it in my living room." *$1,089*
- **Stackable wooden stools** "They're like sculptures. You could use them as end tables or for sitting on." *$189 each*

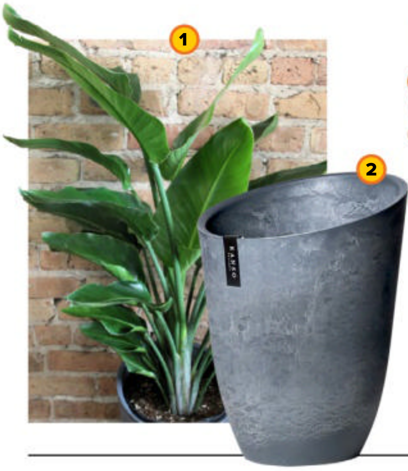
RICHARD'S FABULOUS FINDS

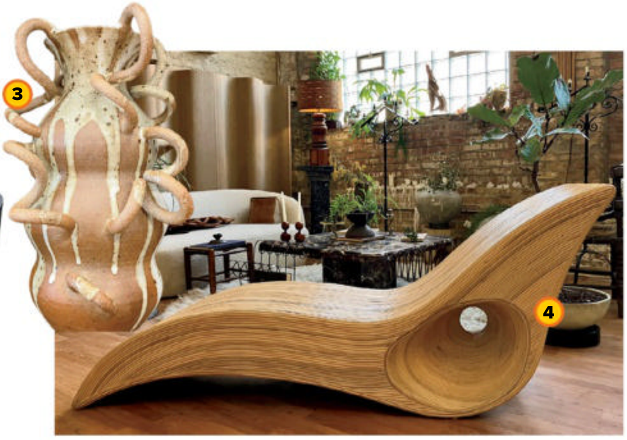
2545 W. North Ave.,
Humboldt Park

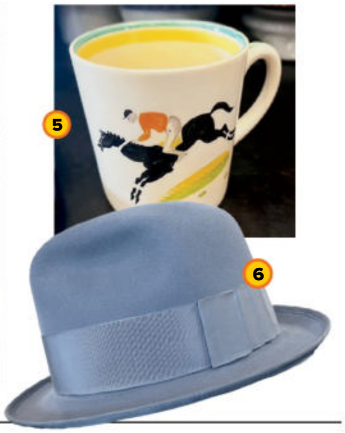
"Richard Biasi has helped my students find stunning mid-century suits for weddings and dance events."

WISH LIST

- **British vintage mugs** (5) "I don't know much about equestrian sports, but these look fun and unique." *$175 for a set of nine*
- **1950s fedora** (6) "A classic that dresses up any outfit, for men or women." *$145*
- **Bow ties and scarves** "A great way to introduce a pop of color in your outfit and make your whole look sophisticated." *$25 and $45*







PHOTOGRAPHY: (LEE) JEFF CALLEN PHOTOGRAPHY; (MY MODERN OASIS) ELIZABETH CARLISLE; (OTHERS) COURTESY OF STORES

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Community Walks

STORE VS. STORE

Sip and Shop

These two spots blend refined retail with café culture. By JUDY SUTTON TAYLOR

VS.

Space 519

200 E. CHESTNUT ST., STREETERVILLE

A next-gen version of the Walnut Room for ladies who lunch and have luxe taste

Origin story Couple and co-owners Lance Lawson and Jim Wetzel parlayed their love of travel and fashion into this mini department store. Opened in 2018, it packs surprises with apparel, accessories, and decor from New York, Europe, and beyond.

Register rarities Exclusive is the name of the game. This is the only spot in town where you can find a Valextra mini bucket bag, Flamingo Estate tomato hand soap, and a Lily Juliet caviar dish under one roof.

The dish Its 40-seat restaurant, the Lunchroom, has all the hallmarks of top-tier dining without the fussiness. Salads and sandwiches come on breads from Publican Quality Bread and pHlour Bakery. For a quick fix, hit the counter for barista-crafted drinks with beans from Metric Coffee.

Look ahead A second location is opening at the redeveloped Plaza del Lago in Wilmette this spring, including a new concept called the Lago Room, an all-day café with a wine and cocktail menu.

Altar Home

1858 W. CHICAGO AVE., EAST UKRAINIAN VILLAGE

A new corner storefront where style makers go for Tulum vibes and specialty coffee

Origin story Step into what feels like a friend's vacation home. It's all part of the transformation that Larisa Stanojevic and Nikola Scepanovic made to a once-blah tax company storefront, refashioning it with rattan fixtures, woven rugs, and lounge chairs.

Register rarities The shop's custom line of candles and lotions keeps the boho flow going, with scents of myrrh, amber, and frankincense.

MILAN
HAND LOTION

The dish Take a seat next to the coffee bar and order a spicy mocha with cayenne. Specialty snacks, such as Elements adaptogen-infused chocolates and Brooklyn Biltong jerky, can be a quick fix, or grab a bottle of N/A bubbly to go.

Look ahead Wait until May, and then an outdoor patio will call. Until then, the quick Wi-Fi and dog-friendly policy will tempt you to sit back and stay awhile.

PHOTOGRAPHY: (SPACE 519 INTERIOR) NATHAN KIRKMAN; (BAG) COURTESY OF VALEXTRA; (SOAP) JOHN VON PAMER; (SOUP) TIMOTHY MUSHO; (ALTAR HOME) NIKOLA SCEPANOVIC

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RESEARCH: HOW OUR WINNERS ARE CHOSEN

- Five Star Real Estate Agents, Five Star Mortgage Professionals and Five Star Home/Auto Insurance Professionals do not pay a fee to be included in the research or the final lists.
- Each professional is screened against state governing bodies to verify that licenses are current and no disciplinary actions are pending.
- The inclusion of a real estate agent, mortgage professional or home/auto insurance professional on the final lists should not be construed as an endorsement by Five Star Professional or this publication.
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Carolyn Michals is a trusted real estate expert who has been serving Chicago and the collar counties since 1996. She founded Michals Realty, Inc. in 2003 and has closed a multitude of real estate transactions ever since. Licensed Real Estate Broker in Illinois and Florida, she represents buyers, sellers, landlords and investors, in addition to providing Illinois appraisal services. As a former flight attendant, Carolyn values client service, patience and integrity. Her strong negotiation skills and tenacity ensure a seamless experience with every transaction. Call Carolyn; she is always available to guide you through all your real estate endeavors.

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Real Estate Advisor

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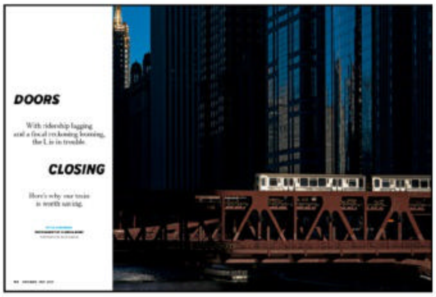

DOORS

CLOSING

The L in Crisis

(Continued from page 67)

and rectangles depicting the structure of regional transit oversight: 47 board members and 21 individuals with the power to appoint those board members spread out across the four agencies (CTA, RTA, Metra, and Pace).

This tangled structure, which looks like the hedge maze in *The Shining*, poses distinct challenges. The appointing authorities include the mayor of Chicago, the governor, the Cook County board president, 13 separate suburban Cook County commissioners, and board presidents and executives from the collar counties (DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry, and Will). These people have competing concerns, and the interests of the city and the suburbs rarely align, so initiatives that benefit one party are routinely torpedoed by others. And since the agencies aren't united, each submits its own bid to the federal government for financial support.

This arrangement has most damaged the RTA, supposedly the agency coordinating the other three. Schlickman says that his biggest frustration when he ran the RTA was the stipulation that it could insert itself into the planning process of the CTA, Metra, or Pace only with a two-thirds supermajority vote of the relevant agency's board, which, given all those conflicting interests, was tough to get.

At the end of its report, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning suggests two options for restructuring: Combine the four agencies into one unified organization, or assign a regional body with greater authority to manage them. State Representative Buckner, for one, thinks a single service board overseeing the CTA, Metra, and Pace is a good idea. As he describes it, the three agencies form an archipelago – entities that are geographically affiliated but ultimately islands unto themselves. "They put up a nice united front when they go talk to the City Council or the state legislature to make it seem like they're all on the same page, but anybody who spends any time on the system will tell you that we know they're not." As an example of that lack of coordination, Buckner cites a complaint he hears frequently from commuters who take a Metra train from the city to the suburbs: They often see a Pace bus leaving their station just as they arrive and must then wait sometimes 40 minutes for the next one.

Buckner is part of a coalition of state legislators, including Representative Eva-Dina Delgado and Senator Ram Villivalam, behind a proposed bill that would create the Metropolitan Mobility Authority. This new agency would eliminate the RTA and oversee the other three agencies, including the CTA. While the RTA ostensibly provides oversight right now, the MMA would have real power, because the service boards of the individual agencies would be eliminated. (An earlier MMA proposal would have merged the CTA, Metra, and Pace, dissolving those agencies.) Villivalam argues that a more unified structure would lead to smoother transfers between routes (including one pass and app for the entire system), better sharing of resources, and a more comprehensive perspective on the region's transit needs. It would also mean less control of urban transit, including the L, by the city itself.

For rail transportation in particular, says Joseph Schwieterman, a professor of public administration at DePaul University, a more integrated regional network provides structural advantages. He cites a recent proposal for a Metra line that would connect O'Hare, Union Station, McCormick Place, and Hyde Park. With consolidated oversight, none of this would require substantial new construction or land acquisition; it would involve reappropriating and combining existing Amtrak and Metra tracks. Absorbing these lines into intracity rail would also reduce the need for a circumferential L line if you could more easily transfer between the L and Metra trains.

Villivalam also believes that unification will help tackle the biggest issue facing the L, at least when it comes to public perception: safety. The CPD is responsible for handling security on the L, but some of the lines extend to the suburbs, which are under the jurisdiction of separate departments. "If there's an incident at Jefferson Park on the Blue Line, by the time the CPD responds, the train is at Rosemont," Villivalam says. "And the Rosemont police department might be responding. So then we're not utilizing our resources efficiently."

In addition, Villivalam points out, provisions within the MMA bill would create more positions for "transit ambassadors," who could relieve some of the burden on the CPD. Pioneered by Bay Area Rapid Transit, these ambassadors are unarmed civilians hired to monitor the trains and stations and trained to address minor infractions by riders in a de-escalatory manner. The ambassadors also deal with homeless and other riders in need of attention, which would further ease the burden not just on the police but on train operators. The number of homeless riders on L trains has spiked since the pandemic, leading to confrontations with employees, according to the anonymous rail operator: "When I get to [the end of the line], I have to get the people off the train before I bring the train in the yard. That's the rule the CTA has and that is a nightmare pretty much every day. I have to argue with people, and the police are called every other day."

The CTA has publicly opposed the creation of an agency like the MMA. That's not surprising, considering such a change would strip the CTA of some of its autonomy and likely result in the loss of top-level administrative jobs. But the CTA's Poppe maintains that centralizing control over regional transit would be worse for passengers, too: "As we start to move further and further away from day-to-day operations, it's harder to make the right decisions and the right investments for the rider. What I worry about from an agency consolidation

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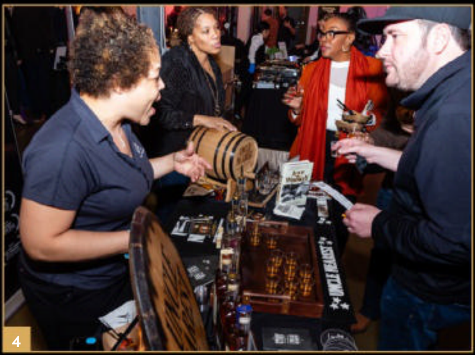
CHEVROLET
MAMMOTH



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PONTIAC
Don Julio

6
WHISTLEPIG

Chicago's most enthusiastic partygoers and discerning tastemakers gathered for Chicago magazine's 10th annual Barrel Night.

More than 250 attendees had the opportunity to connect with master distillers, spirits ambassadors, and the visionaries behind some of the nation's top distilleries.

Barrel Night 2025 showcased an impressive lineup, featuring Crown Royal, Bulleit, Don Julio, WhistlePig, Never Say Die, Journeyman, St. George Spirits and more.

Guests indulged in Coffey Girls' honey bourbon coffee cakes, brisket sliders by Soul and Smoke, Gene & Georgetti's famous sausage and pepper, delicious donuts by Stan's. They embraced their artistic expression with body paint by Rosa Flor Designs and canvas painting by Chicago Sip and Paint.

PHOTOGRAPH: FRANCIS SON

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1 Mammoth tasting station. 2 Canvas painting by Chicago Sip and Paint. 3 Cotton candy served by Von Poof. 4 Uncle Nearest tasting station. 5 Don Julio served its Rosado tequila. 6 The lively event at the Ravenswood Event Center.

perspective is you remove community-based and rider-based decision making and put it in this high-level ivory tower of policymakers."

The biggest obstacle to creating the MMA, though, might be organized labor. Within the region's public transit system, there are more than 30 unions representing a total of 15,000 workers. Each of these unions now has its own contract, but if they were to have to negotiate with a unified administration in the future, their contracts might have to fall more in line with those of other employees. For that reason, the Chicago Federation of Labor backs another state bill, called United We Move, which would retain the current agencies and their boards, though with requirements that only people with specific work experience, such as in transit or finance, occupy board seats. It allows, though, that the RTA should be given more oversight over the other agencies, including being empowered to more freely intervene in setting fares.

In the coming weeks, lawmakers will convene with stakeholders to negotiate the final legislation, which could be a compromise of both bills. As Bob Reiter, president of the CFL, points out, Villivalam has cosponsored both, which means that "he wants to get this done, and he's trying to bring everybody together." Ultimately, though, whatever is agreed upon for the future of Chicago's public transportation, it will need Pritzker's signature. When I asked Villivalam if he sensed that the governor understands the urgency of the situation and the consequences if nothing happens, he didn't mince words: "Yes."

Yet I get the sense that these legislators won't be rushed, that they want to make sure they get this right. The L desperately needs money. Where that revenue and funding will come from – a new state sales tax has been floated – is still the big question. But there's a slogan Buckner and Villivalam keep invoking: "There will be no revenue without reform."

AT THE BELMONT STOP, GRAHAM Garfield and I hop on the Brown Line for a trip around the Loop. As we ride along, I lose my balance at various points. "You've gotta get a wide stance," he says, spreading his legs in an A-frame.

Garfield shares with me some of his favorite things about the L. He mentions old maps in his possession, and vintage train cars he prizes. As we approach the LaSalle/Van Buren station, which dates back to 1897, he calls it a "diamond in the rough." With some renovations, he says, it could be one of the most beloved stops in the city. It's hard not to admire his optimism.

We start talking about other cities' transportation systems. Garfield mentions that those of New York City and London both have incredible branding but thinks that Chicago's is just as strong. "I'm biased, but I always felt the CTA had more aesthetic currency in the city than it was taking advantage of," he says. Before working on the RPM, Garfield spent 12 years as the CTA's general manager of customer information, refining how the agency communicated with riders through signs, maps, and digital products. The CTA's visual language was so strong already, he says, that all he had to do was figure out how to deploy it in a way people would notice.

For all its problems, the L holds great significance for Chicagoans. It's more than a means of moving people around – it's integral to the city's character. As a child, I could feel the gentle vibrations of a Red Line train underneath our floors at home. When I was a teenager, my miscreant friends and I would slide plastic L maps out of their slots above the train doors and proudly display them on our walls. For years I wore a CTA button-up shirt I bought at a Salvation Army because I thought it looked cool.

The L is well worth saving. And there are already signs it could be turning a corner: The first phase of the RPM project will reduce slow zones and delays, as will future plans to upgrade tracks on the Forest Park branch of Blue Line; the pending Red Line extension will provide access to thousands of Far South Side residents poorly served by public transportation; the new train cars outfitted with GPS will make the Train Tracker more dependable.

Yet questions remain as to whether the CTA is managing these initiatives effectively. The projected cost of the Red Line extension shot up more than $2 billion in 2024 alone, largely because the agency undercounted contracting and engineering contributions. And while the CTA is adding more train service on the Forest Park branch of the Blue Line, there's no date set for track repairs on that stretch or for phase 2 of the RPM.

It's hard to determine which contributed more to the L's current state: mismanagement or lack of funding. Yet the people at the CTA I talked to are clearly passionate about their jobs and provide institutional knowledge that can't be easily replaced. This expertise, if bolstered with resources, could deliver the L we deserve. And for the first time in a century, it seems, the agents of change are mindful of history and of how the decisions they make now will affect people in five, 10, or 20 years.

The creation of the MMA is a big swing to try to upend a structure that isn't moving quickly enough to address what's not working. It could meaningfully reinvigorate what's still the second-best public transit system in the nation. But truly revitalizing the L is going to require more than a new agency and a major infusion of capital. It will demand bold thinking and unencumbered commitment.

The latter goes for everyday Chicagoans as much as it does for agency heads and politicians. Locals gripe about taxes, but everyone in the region – rich and poor, city folks and suburbanites – is going to have to pony up to have the transit system this city needs. Think of it as an investment: A joint study of Chicago's transit system conducted by Argonne National Laboratory and MIT asserts that every dollar poured into public transportation generates $13 in economic activity. Despite all the technological advances of the past two centuries, there is still no more pleasurable mode of travel than riding a train – and it's a lot safer than driving.

If we take any lesson from this city's problematic history of rapid transit, it's that whatever legislation emerges, it will need safeguards in place and quick consequences for failures. Because no one wants to be kept waiting for the train. ■

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Shelby Van Pelt

The novelist, 44, on fan mail, a close call with the Boston bombing, and following up a bestseller

Interview by MIKE THOMAS

■ **When I was signing with my agent**, I remember having a brief conversation with my husband: Should I use my real name or should I use a pen name? I truly had this very flawed idea that you just write a book and it goes out there and no one really cares who the person is behind it. And that's absolutely not true. People care *a lot*. That's been a surprising thing to navigate.

■ **It's a very common fear** when you write fiction that you're going out naked into the world with your whole self on display, because everyone's going to assume it must be autobiographical. With *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, I almost deliberately avoided having a character who looked like me. But the joke's on me, because even if the character is a completely different generation, different gender, you can't get around it.

■ **A nice card will arrive at my house** from some really nice person who has taken the time to handwrite a note about my book, and it's so sweet. But then part of me is like, How did you find me?

■ **I have tried so many times to become a regimented 5 a.m. writer.** I have finally accepted that my brain does not work that way. I will sort of catch the vibe, so I tend to go in bursts. It will pour out of me sometimes for several hours. And then I have to take a break for a couple of days. It's like a writing hangover.

■ **When I really get into a flow state**, time doesn't exist. I couldn't tell you whether it's been 30 minutes or three hours. I once had a bag of chips sitting next to me, and I looked over and it was empty. I did not remember eating any of them: 1,800 calories' worth of potato chips, and didn't enjoy any of it.

■ **I almost always have my earbuds in when I'm drafting.** My only rule is it has to be music I know well; I can't listen to something new when I'm writing. This is silly, but I picture the unhelpful part of my brain having a sing-along in the back of my skull. It's like, It's distracted, now I can get to work.

■ **Occasionally I will send a short story under a pen name** to a random and usually nonpaying lit magazine, just to see. It almost always gets rejected.

■ **Throughout my 20s and early 30s**, I ran 13 marathons. I was fast enough to qualify for Boston in 2013. We have friends who had a second-floor apartment on Boylston Street, where the marathon finishes, so they had a watch party. I crossed the finish line a couple minutes before the first bomb went off. The second was near a trashcan right in front of their apartment. I had run by it. My husband had come down to cheer me on. I had gone over and given him a high-five. He was literally leaning up against that trashcan. Right when he got back upstairs, the thing exploded.

■ **I know there will be people who aren't going to like my next book** as much as the first. It could be the best book in the world, and there will be, I guarantee, a contingent of people who say, "Well, it's OK, but I really wish there was an octopus." And I'm kind of like, I wish there was, too. I get it. But I need to move on. I need to grow as a writer. Marcellus is always going to be there in the first book, but I need to see what I can do without him. C

Illustration by QUICKHONEY

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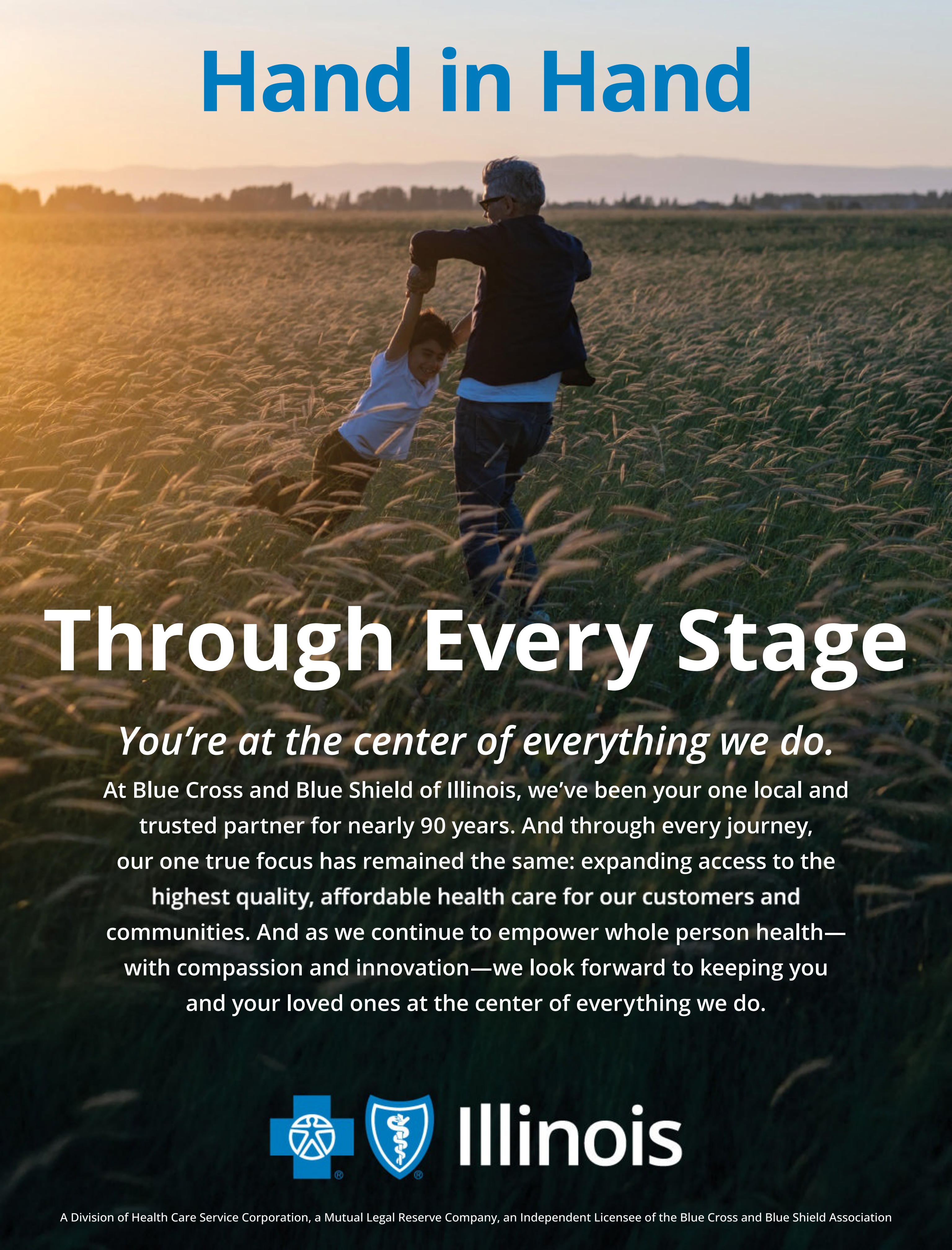

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